

DOWN ENGLAND

BY

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"THE MAN OF THE MOMENT," "MURRAY MURGAIROYD, JOURNALIST"

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FOR ENGLAND

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"A great gathering of the social world." (Chapter I.)

For England!

(H. M. S. S. S.)

FOR ENGLAND

"WHEN GREEKS JOINED GREEKS
THEN WAS THE TUG OF WAR."

CHAPTER I

THE SHADOW ON THE BLIND

IF the Princess Dolgorouki came from no one knew where, and lived no one knew how, she at any rate succeeded in spending money freely *à deux mains*, and in attracting to her pretty house in Park Lane all the rank, wealth, and beauty of the capital of the British Empire. It was "understood"—the phrase of generalities—that her title and estates (?) were Russian, and her antecedents French. It is one of the anomalies of social life in London that some people, well connected, well born, and with apparently many advantages, never get into the swim at all ; while others, guided by some fortuitous star, with few of these attributes, are admitted into the most select

circles, and take their place by right of conquest.

Stéphanie, Princess Dolgorouki, had two great advantages. She was a foreigner, and she possessed both grace and beauty. English people are said to be insular. It is nevertheless true that no European capital is so easy as London in its acceptance of men and women, especially women of another nationality, on their own valuation.

Princess Stéphanie had been established in Park Lane for five years. She had the world at her feet. Marriage had been offered her again and again—it was “understood” that she was a widow—by peers of ancient lineage and broad acres, by Cabinet Ministers, by commoners of wealth and distinction. No one had as yet captured the citadel of her life and affections. She had the rare art of turning lovers into friends, a more abiding relationship.

Marcion Dacres was among the latest to surrender to that svelte form, fair hair, fascinating French-English, lovely complexion, and enigmatical smile which constituted Stéphanie Dolgorouki, as she chose to present herself to the masculine world. Her smile, disclosing the beautiful teeth, and deepening the dimple of her strong little chin, was Stéphanie's strong point. It might mean so

much or it might mean so little, a caress or a sarcasm, an appreciation or a deprecation. Women of the eighteenth century wore masks on occasion that men might strive to find what was hidden behind them. The modern woman of the world wears the mask of nature, and it is as mysterious, and consequently as attractive as its more material predecessor.

There had been a great gathering of the social world in the bijou mansion in Park Lane, when one or two stars of the operatic world had sung. Now the rooms were thinning as the midnight hour approached, some to go home, some to final entertainment elsewhere.

Marcion Dacres had come late, but was preparing to make his adieus—reluctantly, for the spell of his hostess was upon him. The Princess noted it—as she noticed everything with those inscrutable violet eyes—and made the young man a gesture with her white fan, which he interpreted to mean the single monosyllable, “Wait.” Marcion strolled to a wide table in the salon and took up a book of views, passing the time until the late lingering guests should have departed. At thirty years of age Dacres was the most remarkable, and the least remarked, young man in London. The world had heard one day with surprise that he had been appointed to the headship of a very

important department of the Admiralty. The Service Clubs superciliously avowed themselves unconscious of his existence ; and the First Lord was asked by his intimates in what unknown ocean he had angled for his last fish. But the First Lord merely replied that Dacres was the right man in the right place, as time would prove. On the following day the world had forgotten the appointment, as it forgets every one who is not daily *en évidence* in the newspapers. As a matter of fact Marcion owed his appointment to one of these very channels of public opinion. He had written an anonymous paper in the *Daily Mentor*, which showed not merely intimate knowledge of the navies of the day, but also a comprehensive appreciation of the needs of our own, especially as regards coast defence. Time was when such a communication would have been ignored, and the paper been relegated to the waste-paper basket of official contempt and neglect. But the administration of Lord Arnall, the Premier, was quite different, and Sir Edwin Sykes, the First Lord, was alive to the responsibilities of an office upon which Great Britain depends for its survival.

Sir Edwin met the editor of the *Mentor* at the Reform, and asked for the name of his contributor. Mansfield, the chief of the *Mentor*,

did not himself know Dacres. The paper had been offered him, and his capable eye had appraised its merit. He could not give up the name of the writer without the latter's consent. In the end an interview was arranged. Sykes found that Dacres had not "put all his goods in the shop window," to use an expressive colloquialism. In a few months an Admiralty figure-head was promoted to the House of Lords, and a pension. Marcion Dacres stepped into his place, the world, as has been said, wondering and sneering not a little. Dacres was a man of strong physique, black, intelligent eyes, curly black hair, and clean shaven. A sailor by instinct, the owner of a small steam yacht named *The Midget*, there was not an inch of coast of the English Channel, or of the North and Mediterranean Seas Dacres had not visited, not a patois of the French seaboard he could not patter. Master of his subject, the First Lord had set him to evolve an elaborate scheme of coast defence, in which every vulnerable point should have its due consideration.

For ominous political clouds were on the horizon, and the scum of French politics was on the top.

* * * * *

Dacres was the last guest. Princess Sté-

phanie summoned him to her side. The young man went practically to no other house, except to official functions he could not avoid. He spent all the time he had at his disposal at his country seat, which had the tidal Avon—the Hampshire Avon—flowing beneath the garden terrace.

Marcion was attracted to his hostess in the first instance—they met at a garden party given by Lord Arnall at his Epping seat—by her inscrutability. Here was a woman out of the common, a beautiful being with a soul above chiffons, who could think and talk brilliantly. There was a mystery, too, about her, a something to unravel, a riddle to be read. It piqued Marcion's intellectual curiosity. Stéphanie encouraged this dark horse of the political world—for reasons of her own. He began to frequent her salon. His imagination stimulated his affections or usurped their place. Never having been in love, Marcion had nothing to guide him. It was a *terra incognita* in which he was groping his way. Fascinated physically and intellectually, lonely, susceptible under certain conditions, Dacres believed himself in love.

For a time the counterfeit is as absorbing as the reality.

The Princess sat down by his side. She was

in one of her *insouciant* moods. Stéphanie had the gift to perfection of the heathen Chinese. She could look absolutely childlike and bland. No guile lurked in her eyes, which were of the hue and openness of the skies of a summer noon.

"It is good of you to come. These things"—Stéphanie waved her hand towards the bric-à-brac and palms as the symbols of the ornamental—"must seem so small to a mind like yours. Sir Edwin Sykes was only telling me the other day what a genius you had for details, plans, figures—things we women cannot conceive of."

"You know I like to come," replied Marcion, "or I am afraid—such is the selfishness of the mere man—I should not be here."

"You never tell me of your work. I could not understand it, of course, but I do not like to feel I am altogether outside your life—your work is your life, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose it is a large part of it," assented Dacres.

"I must come and peep in at your office some day. I shall not tell you. I shall get permission from your chief. Then I shall take you unawares—Marcion!"

The Princess had been half-looking away, half-looking at him from under partially-closed

lids. She said the christian name with a curious indescribable intonation—like a caress. It was the first time she had used it. Marcion was entranced, intoxicated. Her nearness permeated him. The soft perfume of her dress, the gleam of her white shoulders, the symmetry of her bosom and shapely arms, the poetry of the midnight hour, the whole combined to stimulate his senses, while it dulled his intellectuality, and banished his habitual caution.

She went on: "I shall find you with dishevelled dress and rumpled hair, and a far-away look in your eyes, while the table is littered with figures no one but yourself can understand."

Marcion laughed.

"I am more like that at home—the office only sees results—for the calculations you speak of I must have quiet with the tide lapping at my feet. That is where my work is really done."

"I should like to see you at your home best," she said.

"It would be a great joy to receive you there, Princess! I ought to have been back at the Moyle—that is the name of my Hampshire place—to-day; but I failed in my duty at your bidding, and came here instead."

"Why ought you to have been back?"

"For two reasons. In the first place, the plans I have been engaged upon for a year——"

Princess Dolgorouki held her breath for a moment, and turned to look at him more fully.

"Yes," she said, "the plans?"

"Are practically completed. They only require touching up here and there. Then they will pass out of my keeping into the hands of Sir Edwin Sykes—and of the nation."

Marcion said the last words *sotto voce*. His work had been done for the nation. His wealth and position robbed him of any mercenary motive, and he was not ambitious—the other great stimulus of the world of politics.

There was a silence of a few minutes. Dacres was picturing the Princess at the Moyle—first, as a guest, then as a possible mistress—the long, low bungalow with its beautiful gardens and wide lawns, the perpetual melody of the river. Stéphanie was thinking of quite other things.

It was the Princess who broke the silence.

"You said there was another reason?"

"Yes, an embarrassing one. I undertook some years ago an obligation in the lightness of my heart—and the nemesis has come home to me. I am guardian to the only child of a life-long friend, who died in India some years

ago. She has been completing her education at a school on the French coast. Now she has claimed a *pied à terre*, if not a home, at the Moyle, and has either arrived to-night—when I ought to have been in Hampshire to receive her—or will arrive early to-morrow, in which case, as I shall catch the first train, I may be in time.”

“How old is she, *cette jeune femme*?”

“Eighteen.”

“You will fall in love with her—what is her name?”

“Dulcima Mordaunt—I do not think so.”

“Why?” The question was so low that it could only reach a very approximate ear.

“Because I love some one else,” replied the young man, carried away by his passion. He knelt on one knee, and seizing the Princess’s hand, covered it with his kisses. It was all so sudden that it took Stéphanie by surprise. There was a sound as of something being knocked over at the other end of the room.

The Princess turned pale and rose.

“Get up,” she said, “Mr. Dacres, please. I cannot hear it; you must not say that.”

Marcion stood up.

“There is some one in the room. I will find out who it is.”

Stéphanie seized the hand which had but just relinquished hers.

"You must not. It is only a servant. He must have thought that all my guests were gone. Now do go, please."

Before Marcion knew what was happening, the Princess had herself let him out into the street.

Dacres was in the condition of a man suddenly subjected, while his blood was at fever heat, to an icy cold shower-bath right on top of his head. He walked on for some time in a maze of doubt and conflicting emotion. Then some impulse made him turn back. About fifteen minutes after leaving the Princess's house he had returned to it, but this time he was on the opposite side of the way. Marcion looked up at the window. On the blind were two shadows distinctly outlined by the brilliant light of the salon behind them. They were those of a man and a woman. The Princess was recognisable enough. Who was the man, engaged evidently in close conversation with Stéphanie Dolgorouki? His profile was on the blind, a heavy man with a drooping moustache. It was not a servant then behind the screen, who had knocked something over at the most crucial point of the interview.

"Who was it?" Dacres felt sure that he should know the man again whom he saw silhouetted on the blind.

CHAPTER II

DULCIMA ARRIVES ON THE SCENE

MARCION DACRES did not arrive at the Moyle in time to receive Dulcima Mordaunt. The latter received him. She kissed him—on the cheek, it is true, a sort of glorified peck. Dacres was, nevertheless, rather taken aback—abashed. He did not remember ever having been kissed before. Dulcima was not in the least abashed. She was as cool as a cucumber. One would have thought that kissing a man a little older than herself, whose only tie with her was the vague one of ward and guardian, was her daily occupation. Dacres came to the conclusion that it was an instance of the meeting of extremes. It was the innocence, the inexperience of Dulcima, which made that kiss possible. Education in a convent school would naturally produce that result, Dacres argued to himself. No doubt he was right.

One would have thought that Dulcima was

the hostess, Marcion the guest. She at once, with rare womanly tact, began to try and make him feel quite at home. Consequently the young man had never felt less so. Fortunately he had carried the key of his study in his pocket. It was the only room his ward had not invaded during those precious hours, in which she had worked her untrammelled will. Dacres had not been five minutes installed before he wished that the spell of the Princess had not been potent enough to prevent his preceding Dulcima in the order of their arrival at the Moyle.

The girl herself was a mystery to him. She was so grown up. Somehow he had expected a child. She was a child when he last saw her a couple of years before. Now she was quite grown up, with a girlish figure, it is true, but an old-fashioned manner. Dulcima began to patronise him at once. Before he had been at the Moyle for an hour Marcion had completely surrendered. He was helplessly at her mercy.

There was nothing Dulcima had not tried. She had been for a row on the river in the smaller of the two boats belonging to Marcion's little yacht, the *Midget*. She had rigged up a hammock attached to two boughs of the ilex to the left of the bungalow, scandalising Dacres by the perfect disregard of appearances which

attended her clambering into it. Yet she was a lady to her finger tips, her guardian could not deny that.

At dinner Dulcima appeared in what seemed, to Marcion's unsophisticated eyes, the simplest of white muslin gowns—it had come from a well-known *modiste* at Paris.

She was a pretty picture of youth and innocence as she sat opposite to him. As Dacres sipped his old brown sherry with his soup, for the first time it began to dawn upon him that life might be better with Dulcima on the other side of the small round table, than it had been hitherto without her.

"Where will you have your coffee? out on the verandah?"—it was the month of July—"I will make it myself. Your people don't understand it, Uncle Dacres"—since when had he been Dulcima's uncle?—"I tried it last night and the coffee was not fit to drink. Leave it to me, and it shall be a dream."

Dulcima rattled on, giving Marcion no time to reply.

"I generally have it in my study, and I am afraid I drink it perfunctorily. Perhaps they bring me tea. I am sure I don't know."

"Then I must teach you, and as to your study that is out of the question. It is much too hot. Besides I am here."

The latter fact was undeniable.

Of course Dulcima had her own way. They had coffee on the verandah, Dulcima making it herself with the assistance of a brass kettle and spirit stand. The diamonds in her rings twinkled in the half-light. The sky had a lurid afterglow, and the air was sultry. A storm was evidently brooding. At the end of the garden they could hear the lap-lap of the tide. At one time there was the sound of oars conveyed to them by the stillness of the night. They were being pulled quietly. The vibration was hardly distinguishable before it ceased.

"I wonder who can be out now," said Marcion. "This is a lonely spot of the river, and we do not often hear oars except when our own boat is out."

He was too lazy, or not curious enough to go and see. Yet it might have been worth while.

Their view was bounded by trees on either side of the Moyle frontage. The boat did not pass across the space which was clear.

"It is very good of you to have me here, Uncle Dacres."

Marcion smiled. He had not had much to do with it. Dulcima Mordaunt had settled that, as now he had seen her he recognised that she was in the habit of settling all things.

"I mean to be very happy," she added, as he did not reply.

"I hope so," he said ; "although I am afraid it is rather a dull place. But I suppose the convent at Mercac was not exactly lively."

Dulcima laughed. It was an enigmatical laugh.

"The sisters were very good," she said ; "I generally did what I liked." She added, after a pause, spent in reviewing the past dispassionately, "My room was on the outside wall."

"Did that help to make it less dull?"

"That helped to make it less dull," Dulcima assented. "Will you have some more coffee, Uncle Dacres?"

"No, thanks. I really must go in now and get to my work."

Nevertheless, for so Dulcima willed, he had a cigar on the terrace, walking up and down by her side, before he went in.

That remark about the convent wall had puzzled Marcion a little. He was Dulcima's guardian, responsible for her upbringing. He had regarded his ward as the product of his idea of a convent school. Marcion began to suspect that some of his preconceived notions would have to be modified. Dulcima was not according to sample. He had expected her to

be shy, retiring, prim, speaking English with a French accent. Dulcima was none of these things.

"There were some nice girls at the school, I suppose?" he asked tentatively.

"Oh, yes, pretty so so. One I chummed with was an American. Only she was a bit afraid of the dark—the quite dark, you know."

Dulcima laughed, evidently at some recollection.

Marcion began to see light as to his ward's character formation.

"You are not a bit like your father, Dulcima."

The girl's face clouded over.

"Dear old dad! I don't remember him much." Then she smiled again: "Who am I like, Uncle Dacres?"

It was Marcion's turn to laugh now.

"Yourself, I should say—and no one else."

Then he did go indoors, not wishing to be catechised further. Dulcima climbed into her hammock. She voted it much too hot to be within four walls. There she lay, making a kind of mental patchwork quilt in which past, present, and future were curiously blended. Gradually the darkness deepened around her. An owl flew by in quest of its evening meal. There was the distant blare of a steam siren.

After a while Dulcima's thinking grew blurred and indistinct. She slept. When she woke up, she shivered, a cool night breeze had sprung up. It was almost pitch dark. Suddenly the girl was alert. There was the sound of footsteps from the direction of the house, which was now only a black outline. Dulcima sat up holding on to the rope. Her limbs were cramped from the position in which she had been lying for so long. The footsteps had only sounded on the terrace in front of the Moyle, which was flagged. As soon as the grass was reached, they were deadened. Dulcima thought it was her guardian and waited for him to call or come to her. She rather looked forward to having him help her down from her perch. He neither called nor came, however. Then she saw a black figure running towards the river. Dulcima shouted, "Uncle Dacres! I am here—in the hammock." There was no answer. The figure had by this time got beyond her vision. It was mysterious. The girl's pulses quickened, and her bosom rose and fell. It was excitement, not fear. She felt certain something was happening, some mystery was in the air. She jumped down, ran along the grass towards the river in the direction the figure had gone, as fast as her legs could carry her. Before she had

got three parts of the way across the lawn, Dulcima heard a call. Then there was the sound of oars. She was just in time to see a white boat rapidly disappearing down the river in the direction of the open sea.

With no little anxiety Dulcima retraced her steps towards the Moyle. She wondered what that surreptitious departure meant, and as to the identity of the man whose figure she had seen. The Moyle was outlined before her, dark, quiet. What had become of Marcion Dacres?

CHAPTER III

WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO MARCION DACRES

DULCIMA quickened her steps to a run in her anxiety when she reached the highest slope of the terrace. She passed under the verandah, and through the door, which was open, into the hall. As she did so, an eight-day clock sounded the hour. It was eleven. Dulcima must have slept nearly a couple of hours. A pendant lamp, protected by an ornamental glass frame from the wind coming in at the door facing it, hung from the ceiling of the hall. Nothing appeared disturbed. A silver tray, on which cards were received (when there were any) and letters were handed, stood on a small table. The idea of a robbery, which had been in Dulcima's mind, no longer appeared probable. The tray, not to mention other things, could have been so easily annexed. Still that stealthy departure, and the fact that no notice had been taken of the girl's call, had to be explained. The

two maid servants, who slept in a gable attic, had evidently not been disturbed. The cook, married to the gardener, slept at the lodge. Dulcima opened the door of the study, which was on the left-hand side of the passage beyond the dining-room. She tapped lightly with her knuckles on the panel as she entered. There was no response. At first she thought the room was empty, and was about to go out again, when in the dim light cast by a reading lamp on the table, she saw there was a dark something lying on the carpet. It was not even distinct enough to be called an outline, but was like a long dark blotch. Dulcima knew instinctively that it was what she had come to look for—her guardian, Marcion Dacres. Her heart stood still. For the first time in her life, she was face to face with what looked ominously like a tragedy. Her face flushed, but her hands were icy cold to her finger tips. Taking the lamp from the table, Dulcima carried it with unsteady grasp, and held it over the recumbent form of Dacres. His arm-chair, in which he habitually sat to his work, was pushed away as if he had got up suddenly. He was lying full length between it and the door. Now that she could see better, Dulcima, who had great natural courage, and high animal spirits, was not so frightened. A

moment's inspection showed that the body lay on its side, and there was an angry red mark across the forehead. In one place the skin was severed, and some blood had trickled down on to the cheek, and then on to the floor. As Dulcima was examining him, wondering what she should do, Marcion groaned. He was not dead then, only stunned or faint. On a slab in the hall were a carafe of water and a couple of tumblers placed there by the parlourmaid before she went to bed to be ready in case they were wanted. Marcion generally had a little weak whiskey and water the last thing. The maid had added the second tumbler since Miss Mordaunt had become a member of the previously bachelor establishment.

Dulcima put the lamp down, and ran out, returning promptly with the water bottle. She then turned Dacres over on his back—he groaned again slightly as she did so, either in pain or dimly conscious that he was being touched—and sprinkled his face with the water. Then with her handkerchief damped, she washed the blood off his forehead. Marcion had certainly received a very nasty blow; but even in her inexperience of such things, Dulcima felt sure it was not dangerous.

She kept up the sprinkling, and every now and then called him by name, "Uncle Dacres."

After a little while the young man showed signs of returning consciousness, upon which Dulcima redoubled her efforts. Presently her patient sat up, and passing his hand over his wounded forehead, said :—

“Where am I? What has happened?”

Marcion's eyes sought Dulcima's for an explanation. They were very close together, she kneeling on the carpet, he half lying, half sitting by her side. Her violet eyes, deepened into blue by her solicitude, looked very sweet and attractive. Their habitual sauciness was banished for the time. Marcion did not realise much of it then. His eyes took the picture in, and retained it. He was able to recall it afterwards. At present he seemed merely to be vaguely searching for an answer to his questions.

“You fell, Uncle Dacres. I think you must have been struck. I came in and found you on the carpet.”

Suddenly his brain began to work, not merely to recall, but to apprehend. It was quickened by what had for long been the one absorbing pursuit in which all his faculties were employed.

“The papers! Did he take the papers?”

“What papers?” asked Dulcima, bewildered.

“The papers on the study table.”

Dulcima jumped up. Except for an inkstand and a blotting-pad, the table was bare.

"Yes!" she admitted; "they are all gone."

So it was robbery after all, but robbery of a different kind from what she had pictured: the stealing of a nation's secret, and the lock-picking of a man's brain.

Dacres staggered to his feet, Dulcima holding out her hand to steady him. His eyes were haggard and wild, his hair unkempt, the blood was still trickling a little, adding to the wildness of his appearance. He glared round the table. It was indeed true. The work of a year had been stolen in a night. Marcion turned very white again, and would have dropped down, had it not been for the support of his ward's arm. Dulcima helped him to his arm-chair.

"Can you stay alone for a minute, Uncle Dacres, while I get you some brandy? It will do you more good than anything."

Marcion nodded, and Dulcima ran off to the dining-room. She returned very quickly with the decanter, and gave him a stiff dose. Except that there were dark circles under his eyes, and he was very white, Dacres was physically almost himself again. Mentally the shock of his loss had made him a wreck. He buried his face in his hands, the blood from the wound in his forehead slowly oozing through his fingers.

"Gone! gone! stolen! just when it was

completed!" He kept muttering the sentences over and over again to himself.

Dulcima again dipped her handkerchief in water and washed off the stains. He was roused by the touch, and looked up with haggard face and wild eyes.

"You do not know what it means to me," he said bitterly.

"Tell me what happened," she said, in tones a woman might use to a tired and fractious child.

Yet she did not regard him as a child. For the first time in her life, Dulcima was conscious of the elemental difference of sex. She remembered now as she waited upon him in close contact that she had kissed him. The kiss began to mean something to her. It made her cheeks burn. Just when Dacres was least conscious of Dulcima, the girl had achieved the converse. She was not in love, only aware of an awakening. The veil of intimate life was lifting—hers and another's. It was an allegory of all maturity when, in the fairy story, the Prince awakened the Princess from her long sleep—by a kiss.

"I was sitting writing in here; I do not know how much time had elapsed since I left you: I was too much absorbed to be conscious of the clock. Suddenly I felt there was some

one else in the room besides myself. I do not think I heard a sound. It was more the sense of a presence. I jumped up and turned round. It was quite true, there was a man behind me. Before I could call out, or even lift my hands to defend myself, he had struck me across the forehead with something he carried in his hand—I think it was the butt end of a pistol,—and I remember no more until I saw you bending over me.”

“Should you know the man again?” asked Dulcima quietly.

“Yes, I think so. He was dark and foreign looking, had a heavy drooping moustache, and a scar of some kind over his left eye.”

As he said the words “heavy drooping moustache,” Marcion remembered the shadows on the blind in Park Lane. It flashed across him that the man who had knocked him down and gone off with the papers was the same man he had seen silhouetted on the blind. Was the Princess Dolgorouki privy to the attack which had been made upon him, and to the robbery of that which he valued more than his life? Dacres grew cold with doubt. He felt as if something were working about his heart. The whole world seemed slipping from his grasp. There is nothing more biting to a man of honour than the after-bitterness of the kiss of treachery.

He was recalled to himself and to the present by the calm accents of Dulcima's voice ; and as he looked into her clear, honest eyes, Marcion began to feel that all was not yet over.

"There is one thing clearly to be done," she said.

"What is that?"

"To go after the robber, and get back what he has stolen."

"How can I? I do not even know which way he has gone."

"But I do. I saw him leave the house. I thought it was you, and I called after him. When he did not reply, I knew that something was wrong, and ran after him, but he had too long a start."

"Which way did he go?"

"He jumped into a boat and made off down the river."

Dacres was silent for a minute or two. His fine brain was dislocated in its action, and did not yet work as quickly as it was wont to do. Then he stood up.

"Yes, you are right. I will start at once. Even if it is impossible to catch him on the way, his destination is clear enough."

Dulcima looked a note of interrogation.

"Paris."

"I shall go with you," she said.

"You cannot—forgive me, a girl would hamper my movements."

"I do not think so. A woman's wit may sometimes find a way when a man sees only a stone wall."

"I will go and get ready," said Dacres, hardly understanding what she said.

In a quarter of an hour he had returned to the hall dressed in a yachting suit. He went into the study to write a cypher telegram to Sir Edwin Sykes. It ran as follows :—

"Knocked down to-night. Papers stolen. Plans of what has been done, and specifications of what was proposed. Thief apparently foreigner. Am going in pursuit. Shall want indefinite leave of absence. Meantime warnings should be issued to responsible officers, in view attack, that our dispositions may be known to enemy."

Dacres intended to send this telegram when he reached his yacht. As he finished writing it he heard some one enter the room, and after the experience of the night jumped up quickly enough, as may be imagined, and turned round. He was startled to see a youth in the dress of a Breton fisherman of blue serge, with a red cap and tassel on his head. His face was bronzed, evidently by exposure to the weather. Marcion exclaimed in French :—

"What have you come here for? How did you get into the house?"

The air seemed full of mystery, thick with surprises to-night.

The only answer was a silvery laugh—not by any means the laugh of a Breton fisher-boy.

It was Dulcima Mordaunt.

"I told you I was going with you, Uncle Dacres. You said a girl would be in the way. So I have dressed for the part."

Marcion's brow clouded. He was somewhat of the old-fashioned school.

"This is not the time, and I am not in the mood for masquerade," he said roughly. "Besides, I don't think it is quite——" He paused at a loss for a word.

Dulcima laughed at her guardian's discomfiture. She had expected it.

"Nevertheless," she said, "I mean to go, and you will find me of use before you've done. No one but you need know who I am,"—she blushed through her improvised tan—"or what I am."

Then she came up closer and linked her arm in his.

"I once sold fish at the convent door. No one suspected me. Do let me go, Uncle Dacres! You will be ever so lonely without me. You need not be afraid for me. I can

swim like a duck, and shoot like a prize marksman. Besides, I can think, and see as far into a stone wall or round it as—as—most people. You will let me come, won't you, Uncle Dacres? "

Dulcima was in the habit of getting her own way—which is not good for any one—and she got it that night.

CHAPTER IV

IN PURSUIT

FELIX BOISDEFFRE thrust the stolen papers into a black bag as he ran down the terrace lawn towards the river. At the sound of Dulcima's voice his heart beat quickly. Coming from the darkness of the trees, and from a height, the call had something mysterious about it. He hardly knew if it was human or some voice of conscience exterior to himself; for Boisdeffre, like many other criminals, was intensely superstitious. At top speed he cleared the distance which separated him from the river, and jumped into the boat which was waiting for him at the landing place close to the boathouse. At a word of command the men on the shore side dug their oars into the bank and pushed off; and the skiff headed for the mouth as fast as four oars could propel it.

Boisdeffre, hugging the bag, breathed more freely. The voice had only called once. The

stricken Englishman lay a stunned mass on his back in the study of the Moyle. There was no appearance of pursuit.

One hundred thousand livres and the hand of the most beautiful woman in the world had been obtained, or at any rate earned, wondrously easily. That was the benefit of a lonely spot, a well-chosen moment, and a little reliable information.

Boisdeffre was in love—with himself, and with Stéphanie Dolgorouki. The price of the gratification of both his affections lay enclosed in that little black bag. He had earned his hundred thousand livres ; with them he would marry Stéphanie, and yet have the spending of them afterwards. It was one of the few cases in which you could eat your cake and have it likewise.

That Stéphanie Dolgorouki hated and feared him had not occurred to Felix, who, himself a Socialist and Communist, loved Stéphanie the more that she had become an aristocrat. In addition to his love of himself, and of Stéphanie, Boisdeffre was equipped with a few hatreds. In this category perfidious Albion held an honourable place. Amongst his hatreds, curiously enough, one was for the very man for whom these papers were intended, Louis Didot, who had risen to be

Chief of the State in France after a political *débâcle*. Amid the chaos of conflicting parties, and the strifes of the scum of political life, which had risen to the surface during the great upheaval, Didot was a man who elbowed his way to the front by sheer force of will and by dint of knowing his own mind, and sticking to it. The "Nationalists," as they were pleased to call themselves, held France, and Didot was their acknowledged leader. He was determined to signalise his accession to power, and to consolidate it by organising a crusade against Great Britain. The great Napoleon had built his throne on a foundation laid by his victories in Italy. Didot was not a Napoleon, but the conquest of England would be even more popular; and in France, as elsewhere, popularity is power. Fortunately for his schemes, the settled constitutional government, which had gone before, had paid great attention to both the land and sea forces. Money had been expended lavishly and yet wisely. Great Britain, having a genius for waiting, was, as usual, a day behind the fair.

The theft of Felix Boisdeffre was a part of the general scheme. It was aided by Stéphanie Dolgorouki, because she was the paid servant of both the French and Russian governments.

The Czar had no hand in this deal, however ; for he was no friend of Louis Didot.

The skiff gained the mouth of the river at midnight after an hour's pull. The air hung heavy as a pall. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves. The men who had been rowing with the tide rested on their oars and mopped their brows. Then the coxswain gave the word, and they pulled over to the *Léopard*, the little steamer which had been placed at the disposal of Felix Boisdeffre for the purpose of this expedition. On their way they passed the lights of the *Midget*. The latter, even to the somewhat untrained (from a nautical point of view) eyes of Felix, suggested a rare turn of speed for her size.

"Whose boat is that ? " he asked.

The coxswain was able to answer it, as he had asked the same question earlier in the evening.

"It is the property of a private gentleman, who is very fond of the sea—Monsieur Dacres. He has a house up the river, but is a good deal in London ; and is connected with the 'Amiranté Britannique.' "

Moreau, the coxswain of the skiff, had no idea that his chief had been paying a nocturnal visit to the owner of the *Midget*.

"That is it, is it ? " said Felix carelessly. "It looks a speedy little craft."

Only the outline of the little vessel was to be distinguished, and he was fixing it in his mind. Boisdeffre wished to know it again, should the opportunity occur; knowledge is warning as well as power.

The *Léopard* was sometimes used as a tug, sometimes as a pleasure-boat. It had removable saloon cabins, which were taken out when its more modest function was that of a Havre tug. At the stern end of the vessel, Boisdeffre had mounted a small cannon on a swivel, covering the whole with a tarpaulin so as to avoid stimulating the interest of the curious.

Felix Boisdeffre was a man who liked to be prepared for emergencies. Hence the cannon.

In the dead stillness of the night—the peculiar stillness which often bodes a storm in the summer—Captain Holdfast of the *Midget*, who was on the look-out, was attracted by the sound of the oars, making at rapid pace for the *Léopard*. He had noticed “the Frenchy” arrive in the late evening, and being gifted with a fine, healthy British aversion to “the frogs,” had suspicioned her, as Roger Holdfast would himself have put it. There was cause enough for suspicion, as it was perfectly well known what a ferment had possessed the great mass of our neighbours across the Channel, and that a spark would set light to the biggest con-

flagration since the Seventies, perhaps the biggest of the generation.

The captain switched on the searchlight, and sent a brilliant luminous flood towards the tug, cutting the darkness in two as with a sword. It displayed the million phosphorescent wavelets of the sea, the *Léopard* with its name in white on a chocolate side, the skiff drawn up alongside the tug. The white light descended upon the vessel at an opportune moment, for it showed up Felix Boisdeffre in the act of scaling a rope ladder into the bows. It showed up with exemplary distinction the black bag which he carried in his hand, clutching it tight.

Felix responded to the shaft of light with a hearty anathema.

"What's he been thieving in the dead of night?" muttered Holdfast to himself. "He's no seaman. He's a longshoreman. I've a great mind to send and tell the coastguard I've seen something suspicious."

On board the *Léopard* evident preparations were being made for a speedy departure. From the funnel a thick volume of black smoke was ascending up into the dense atmosphere above.

The man with a black coat, with the suspicious bag in his hand, had disappeared down the companion way.

The more Holdfast thought of it the more

his suspicions grew. He had switched off the light and was meditating. Meanwhile the engines of the tug were in motion, and the vessel swung round with a great scurry and churning of water to get her head in the right direction for the open sea. There was not much space for turning, and Holdfast could not deny his grudging admiration to the seamanship displayed. This did not interfere with his first feeling of suspicion. It rather intensified it.

"By Jove, I'll tell the revenue people what I've seen—the man coming along in the dead of night with a bag in his hand, and then that hurried start in the darkness. If they make nothing of it that's their business."

Holdfast ran down the steps from the bridge. He remembered that the steam cutter of the Coastguard Superintendent, Lieutenant Mallison, was on a tour of inspection and had anchored in the Roads, only a few furlongs away. The captain left a direction with the man on the look-out, and then jumping into a light boat, rowed at a great rate to the cutter. He soon roused up the lieutenant and related his story. The dark hull of the fast departing *Léopard* was still visible, but in a minute or two the stranger would be out of sight.

Mallison thought the incident, coupled with

the hurried departure, sufficiently mysterious to warrant pursuit, so he had steam up, while Holdfast dropped over the side. The lieutenant was a man who had not risen in the Navy as fast as he had expected. He felt himself shelved in his present post, and would be only too glad of an opportunity of getting some kudos by a smart capture. The cutter carried a gun fore and aft.

The pursuit began under a lurid sky, shot across occasionally by streaks of lightning. The cutter was soon clear of the shipping in the Roads, and though smaller was a faster boat than the *Léopard*. Mallison stood by the wheel and swept the horizon with his binocular. They were going at a great rate through the water, the screw making a churning channel through the brine. As yet they could see no traces of the stranger, which apparently had shown them a clean pair of heels. Mallison was just thinking of turning back when there came a brilliant flash of lightning, illuminating the sky from one end to the other, and bringing out vividly the wide seascape.

In the second of intense illumination, Mallison's quick eye had detected the line of smoke. The *Léopard* was showing no light. The lieutenant gave a direction to the man at the wheel, and rang up the engines to full speed.

The lust of pursuit was upon him.

CHAPTER V

CORNERED

FELIX BOISDEFFRE congratulated himself prematurely.

He was under the impression that everything had gone off without a hitch in his well-planned scheme of daring and robbery, that himself and his black bag would arrive at their destination, Havre, without further adventure. He had failed to reckon with the vigilance of Skipper Holdfast and the energy of Lieutenant Mallison. He locked his cabin door, and placing the black bag on the table, took out the contents, and proceeded to make a careful inspection of the papers. As yet he and his employers knew of them only by hearsay. A hasty inspection satisfied Boisdeffre that the haul was even beyond his anticipations. Every existing defence, concealed mine, masked battery, description of gun, was set down in detail. In addition there were suggestions as to improvements with a view to strengthening the

weak spots. Much had been done, some things remained to be carried out. There were likewise plans of signalling, locations for assembling the fleets, and even elaborated schemes of decoy and counter attack. The hand of England lay on the table of the cabin of the *Léopard*. The conceptions of the master mind of the Admiralty had passed into the possession of Felix Boisdeffre. The latter was not expert enough, or sufficiently cognisant of the coast line of the English Channel to fully apprehend what he saw sketched before him, but he knew sufficient to be aware that the papers were of inestimable value to the man for whom they were intended. They would be a wonderful weapon in the armoury of Louis Didot and his naval advisers. The thought damped the ardour of Felix Boisdeffre. It took the gilt off his hundred thousand livres to think that his work was to cement the prestige and power of Didot. He had begun even now to plan a fresh treachery, to scheme for another coup, and a higher and more acceptable bidder. Perhaps Boisdeffre did not realise that Didot understood his tool completely, and that he had to do with a most powerful mind. Didot had prepared for the possible, nay probable, treachery of Boisdeffre before the latter had even conceived it.

Felix was in the midst of his tortuous speculations to the tune of the throbbing of the engines of the tug, when there came a vigorous rattling at his cabin door. He thrust the papers anyhow into the bag, locked the latter into a sliding cupboard, then unfastened the door and threw it open.

The interrupter was Moreau, the captain of the *Léopard*.

"What is the matter, Alphonse?" asked Boisdreffre, seeing that the seaman had news to communicate.

"There is a steamer in pursuit of us. She is gaining on us rapidly."

Boisdreffre was disinclined to believe the statement, doubting its probability.

"How do you know it is after us?"

"I changed the course twice, and in each case the steering of the other boat followed our lead."

Boisdreffre ran up on deck. The lights on the bow and mast-head of the vessel, about which Moreau had told him, were clearly visible. In spite of all that the *Léopard* could do, a few minutes' observation convinced Felix that the stranger was gaining hand over hand. The storm overhead was gathering rapidly. The wind had risen slightly, and the sea was choppy. It was clear that a violent thunder-

storm was impending, but the fact did not interfere with the tenacity of the pursuit.

The lights of other vessels could be seen. They were evidently making for various harbours.

The *Léopard* dare not turn back. The coastguard cutter would not.

The two steamboats drew nearer to one another.

Lieutenant Hallison ordered a gun to be fired as a signal to the *Léopard* to heave to.

"Are we to stop, sir?" asked Moreau.

"Certainly not! Don't take the slightest notice."

Boisdeffre ran down into his cabin, tied a thick string round the black bag, which he had first covered with a waterproof cape of his own. He fastened one end of the string securely to a nail by the porthole, and then dropped the parcel into the sea. He argued that the chances were in favour of the string not being seen, even if the worst came to the worst, and the tug were actually searched.

When Felix was on deck once more, Moreau came up to him from his anxious look out in the stern.

"They will catch us in the next half hour," he predicted.

"I can't think why they are after us," said Boisdeffre irritably.

"A steamer slipping away in the middle of the night, when a storm is just coming on, and carrying no light, is a suspicious object," remarked Moreau philosophically, "if there happened to be any one about with eyes in his head."

Boisdeffre did not mind so much if the stranger was not primed with any specific information.

"We must invent some excuse to explain our movements if they board us," he said.

Moreau shrugged his shoulders as much as to say that was none of his business. He was only obeying orders in what he had done. Boisdeffre considered a little; then his brow cleared.

"I have it," he said; "I had been out to spend the evening with a friend. On my return you handed me a message that my mother was very ill; hence our hurried start."

"That hardly accounts for our carrying no lights," suggested Moreau.

"Oh, yes, the hurry of our sudden departure."

"But they were there all right. We dowsed them just before we started."

"Oh! then the oil gave out, and you were not aware of it."

The conversation was interrupted by the booming of a gun from the cutter. A round shot tore up the water close to the stern of the *Léopard*. Immediately after this there was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder. As the lightning gleamed, they could see distinctly a couple of men standing by the gun on the bows of the cutter, and her general build was apparent, as well as the white ensign she was flying.

"That was a warning," remarked Moreau coolly. "She will hit us next time. It's the coastguard cutter I saw in the Roads."

"Give the order to slacken speed. Hoist a green light."

Felix knew the game was up. He did not mind so much either if it were only a coast-guard affair. It was possible to hoodwink them.

Meantime the sky had grown very dark. The lightning flashed at intervals, and the rain began to descend in torrents.

"Can't we manage to slip away under cover of the storm?" asked Boisdeffre. The density of the atmosphere was much greater than it had been any time previously.

The words were hardly out of Boisdeffre's mouth before a powerful searchlight began to play on them. Owing to the disturbed con-

dition of affairs in France, and the possibility of an invasion, the English Channel was being patrolled by fast cruisers. This was one of them, which had been attracted to the spot by the firing of the cutter's guns. They had been so taken up with the look out for the cutter and by the storm, that they had not noticed the lights of the larger vessel a couple of miles away on the other side.

Boisdeffre swore. They were indeed in a trap.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT THE STORM DID

FELIX acknowledged to himself that the game was up as far as the chances of flight were concerned. If, however, the cutter was in pursuit without definite information, merely upon suspicion, there was every probability the string with the black bag attached would escape notice.

The engines of the *Léopard* were only kept going sufficiently to keep the tug on its course in the tumbling sea. The cutter gained rapidly upon its prey, the lightning displaying the crews on both boats more and more distinctly to each other.

Boisdeffre had grown white and nervous, and was biting the ends of his thick moustache. He had so much at stake. Twice he ran down to the cabin to see that his precious possession had not slipped its string. Moreau had seen Felix bring the bag on board, and

had happened to be looking over the side when Boisdeffre dropped it overboard. It was clear to the skipper that the contents of the bag were the cause of their running away, and of the agitation Felix was displaying only too obviously. He argued that they must be of very considerable value. Moreau's curiosity and avarice were stirred. A brave man, and not too scrupulous, it occurred to him that the transfer of the bag to himself would certainly make his fortune, and that all he had to do, if they escaped the vigilance of the British officer and his men, was to get Boisdeffre into a quiet place, knock him on the head, and so become possessed of the booty. Felix had unwittingly, and quite unintentionally, advertised the value of his cargo alike to Lieutenant Mallison and to Moreau, the latter being probably the more dangerous of the two.

The cutter had come within hailing distance through a trumpet. Preparations were being made to lower a boat. Boisdeffre did not know what to do about the small quickfirer on the deck, whether to expose it or to leave it to be discovered under the tarpaulin. The stormy sky was sufficient excuse for having it covered up.

Suddenly the whole situation was changed. There was the sound of wind rushing and

hurling through the air. The steamer was flung on its side at an angle of thirty-five to forty degrees. The rain descended in sheets, splashing on the deck, and then leaping off it again into the sea. The salt spray was driven into their faces. The sailors clung on with grim determination to any part of the woodwork of the vessel which was nearest to them. One man was flung overboard in a second into the trough of the sea, never to be seen again. Boisdeffre was hurled against the rail on the port side of the steamer, and severely bruised. Even the engines appeared paralysed by the sudden tremendous force of the impact. For a minute or two it seemed as if nothing could save them, but the tug was both heavy and sturdy. What the *Léopard* lacked in speed it gained in stability. Slowly she righted herself, although the gale continued with scarcely diminished intensity. The steersman had clung to the wheel, and again displayed the quality of seamanship, which had won the admiration of Captain Holdfast. As soon as he was able to move he managed to head the steamer round to run before the wind. This eased her at once, and, although the *Léopard* still descended to the depths, and alternately scaled the skies, making Boisdeffre's heart leap up into his mouth with a gulp, thinking that each

descent must mean finality for himself and the little vessel, the danger was really to a great extent past.

When the force of the sudden tornado first struck them, Boisdeffre had heard a great cry unnoticed at the time owing to his absorption in their own peril. Now that he was collecting his scattered senses, the recollection of the sound came back to him. This is the almost universal experience of supreme moments of excitement and peril. Memory registers impressions unheeded at the time, and reproduces them later on when the danger is over.

The cry, on reflection, seemed to have come from the direction of the cutter. Boisdeffre gathered himself together both mentally and physically, and still holding tight on to the rail, gazed out in the direction in which the cutter had been. All was pitch darkness. The salt brine drove into his eyes. That was all. The triangular lights of the pursuing steamer had disappeared. Yet furious as had been the impact of the gale, the cutter could not have got far in so short a time. As Boisdeffre gazed, a brilliant flash of light illuminated the heavens from one to the other, and displayed the boiling surface of the sea like a room suddenly illuminated by a thousand electric lights. But there was no cutter to be seen

for all that. Felix did not doubt that the cry he had heard was the death-cry of all on board the ill-fated vessel, as she turned turtle and sank. Boisdeffre sent a malediction of thankfulness for his escape over the waters. Then he became conscious that Moreau and two or three of the crew, who were on the other side of the tug, were shouting to him, but the bellying of the wind, and the rushing of the water about the steamer's bows and sides prevented his hearing anything except the sound of their voices, muffled as if spoken through wool. Nothing intelligible or articulate reached him.

Felix did not know whether they were announcing that they too had recognised the fate of the cutter, or whether their shouts had reference to the man who had been flung overboard. Both solutions were probable. He was speculating on these suppositions when his attention was attracted to the reflected glow of fire in the sky. From his present position Boisdeffre could see nothing to account for the phenomenon. He regarded it as some atmospheric appearance, the product of the thunderstorm, the worst he had ever experienced either on land or sea. The lightning was playing in all directions, and the thunder boomed and cracked like whole batteries of the heaviest

artillery with hardly any appreciable intervals. In the brilliance of the lightning he noticed that Moreau was pointing out over the sea, conveying some information with his hand, doubtless recognising that his voice did not travel across the deck of the vessel.

Meantime the glow in the heavens, intensified by its background of inky sky, had greatly increased. Boisdeffre determined to try and find out what it was that Moreau and the rest were trying to indicate to him. Slowly and cautiously he worked his way round by the bulwarks until he reached the vantage ground already occupied by the skipper. Felix was rewarded for the trouble he had taken.

Before him was the most awe-inspiring sight that is perhaps ever presented to the gaze of a spectator—that of a great ship on fire.

The cruiser had been struck by lightning, which in a second had set turret, deck and bridge in a blaze. In a calm sea the fire would have been put out in a few minutes; but the fury of the storm and the consequent heeling over of the great ship had prevented the men getting to their positions until the blaze had assumed serious proportions. The sailors and marines could be seen with calm courage and perfect discipline, but with evident extreme difficulty from the tossing of the vessel, working

the fire engines. The fire lighted up the guns, the fittings of the cruiser, and even the faces of the men. Round them played the lightning, but gradually at less frequent intervals. The storm was subsiding as quickly as it had risen. The men on the tug could hardly help cheering the gallant effort that was being made so calmly on board the big ship to fight an enemy infinitely worse than any that human ingenuity can devise. Gradually it became apparent that British courage and determination were going to win this battle, as they have countless others since first the flag flew upon the seas. The area of the fire diminished. The turret was the worst wreck; but the sailors had managed to get the guns down without damage. As Boisdeffre was gazing at the scene with absorbed attention, Moreau came up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

Felix started and turned round.

"What is it, Alphonse?"

"It is time we were off. In half an hour the captain of that cruiser will have got that job off his mind, and will be ready to turn his attention to something else, which will probably be ourselves. Do you think he has forgotten that the cutter flying the white ensign was after us?"

"True, Alphonse! I ought to have thought

of it. Let us get off quickly while there is time."

"We shall have to make a circuit, and retrace our way a bit, so as to keep out of the orbit of that searchlight in case it is not damaged."

So the *Léopard* slewed round towards the British side of the Channel, having been favoured by fate more than perhaps she deserved.

When Captain Giles of the cruiser had time and opportunity to look round, there were no vessels to be seen. The cutter had gone down with all hands.

The *Léopard* had sneaked off into the night.

Felix Boisdeffre had descended to his cabin to haul up the black bag.

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CHAPTER VII

ON THE DECK OF THE "MIDGET"

DULCIMA, transformed into a slim French fisher-boy, and Marcion Dacres made three expeditions from the Moyle to the boat-house, carrying things necessary to themselves for their prospective expedition to try and recapture the stolen papers. Dulcima required more than her guardian, for she took a stock of properties as a change *artiste*. She did not contemplate always being a boy, so she provided herself with the wardrobe of her sex as well. There would have been more journeys had not Marcion intervened, and displayed quite unwonted firmness—to Dulcima.

"We cannot take any more things. My yacht is called the *Midget*, which is not English for the ark. The *Midget* was not built for wardrobes or as a families' removing van."

The sarcasm showed that Marcion was his normal self. He had a thick head. It is a

mistake to think that this kind of skull does not enclose brains.

Dulcima sighed. She overacted it a little so as to destroy its effect.

"Besides, we are losing time," Marcion added.

They got into the boat, the girl at the rudder lines, Dacres rowing. He had a couple of oilskins and had brought them both—one for Dulcima. The leaden pall of the atmosphere indicated what might be expected. The darkness was profound. Fortunately, the tide was high, so as to afford more room for mistakes. Dulcima only ran the light rowboat into the bank once. She had a genius for finding her way about, both actual and metaphorical.

When they came to the open Roads, and the lights of the shipping were to be seen, Dulcima breathed more freely. She had felt the responsibility of her position. Now it was easier.

Marcion kept turning round to look behind him and give the necessary directions. When they had reached within calling distance the young man hailed—

"Yacht ahoy! *Midget*!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" shouted Captain Holdfast, who had been back at his post some time.

The thunder rolled in the distance, and there were occasional flashes of lightning, but as yet the water was still as glass. Marcion got the boat under the side of the *Midget* by a skilful manipulation of his left oar, and then secured it. Holdfast let down a rope ladder, and Dulcima mounted up with her guardian's assistance below and the skipper's above. Her slight form felt very unsubstantial in Dacres' strong grasp. He rightly surmised that she was not overclad, but was costumed for the tropical heat of the night. His heart misgave him as to his yielding to her determination to come. Dulcima was such a bit of a thing. Marcion felt his own bigness by contrast. It was too late now, however, to send her back.

Marcion scrambled on deck, and a couple of sailors jumped down into the boat, and handed up the packages with which she was loaded. Subsequently the boat itself was hauled up on to the davits.

Dacres took Captain Holdfast on one side and told him as much of the circumstances of the robbery as he thought necessary. The skipper capped it with what he himself had seen and done.

"Our first business is to go after the coast-guard cutter," said Marcion.

"I beg pardon, sir, I think our first business is to let down another anchor."

"Why?"

"Because, if I don't make a big mistake, there is such a storm brewing as most folks have not seen on the British coast for many years."

"I only see a black cloud just as we have had for hours."

"I not only see, I smell, sir—sulphur! When salt and sulphur come together Davy Jones opens his locker. I served my time in the tropics and I know what I'm talking about," went on Holdfast firmly, but respectfully.

Marcion had more than a suspicion the seaman was right, but he chafed at the delay. The thought of Dulcima decided him not to run any risks, and probably saved his life—as he admitted to himself afterwards.

Captain Holdfast, taking silence to be consent, went off to make the *Midget* more secure. Dacres crossed to Dulcima's side. She was leaning over the taffrail, taking in the mystery of the night and the lights of the craft in the bay.

"I will show you your cabin," he said.

There were two cabins on deck—the larger the owner himself had always occupied; the

smaller was used for luggage, fishing-tackle, and other impedimenta.

The larger cabin was now to be given up to Dulcima ; Dacres, if he slept at all, would have a hammock slung in the other.

"Very well," she said. "It was very good of you to bring me, Uncle Dacres."

"I must have locked up my wisdom-box, and mislaid the key when I agreed to it," Marcion grunted.

Yet afterwards he was not so sure.

Dulcima laughed.

"I will take care of your wisdom-box, Uncle Dacres, and then you'll never lose the key."

Dulcima meant it. She had not as yet thought much about men, but the conclusion born of her brain during the last twenty-four hours was that woman was a protecting angel unaccountably shorn of wings.

Marcion showed her to her cabin, asked if she would have any difficulty in climbing into her bunk, and then, reassured on that point by seeing her vault into it, himself carried her movables to the places the girl's rapid survey had indicated to herself as desirable resting-places for them.

Marcion's fixed creed was that a woman could do nothing for herself without a man to wait upon her.

Dulcima lay in her bunk, having neglected to come down as yet, and gazed at his efforts with an amused smile. She read his thoughts to a nicety.

"You men do think yourselves indispensable."

Marcion flushed. He was not yet used to the companionship of a thought reader or to being chaffed.

"Help me down," she said, either as further comment, or as an *amende honorable*; for she could have got down perfectly easily by herself.

Dacres came obediently. A pair of bright eyes looked into his. There was a world of witchery in them. Dulcima was kneeling up in her blue knickerbockers. She stretched out her arms, clasped him round the neck, and then slid to the ground.

It was her turn to blush now. She ran out of the cabin door, Dacres following more slowly.

He felt that he was groping about in a land of mystery—poor man. Woman has ever provided the piquancy of life to the mere male by her infinite capacity for stage effects.

A very different drama awaited their eyes as they passed out on to the deck. Marcion was first made aware that something out of the common was happening by Dulcima's action. She turned back, and took his arm, saying simply—

"I am afraid."

Marcion had already learnt sufficient of his ward's character to be aware that such a declaration was not to be produced by a trifle. She was not the sort of girl which jumps on a chair because there is a suspicion of a mouse passing by.

The heat hung intense in the air. The atmosphere thrilled with expectation. The sensation of the impending not only communicated itself to the human items, but to the very vessel itself. The *Midget* shivered, owing to some electrical wave beneath her, from stem to stern. Marcion drew Dulcima across the narrow half of the deck to the ship's side, which was facing the open sea. The quiver of her small hand on his arm gave him an unwonted feeling. His response to the mute confiding appeal set the girl's pulses tingling.

"You need not be frightened, Dulcima. Something is going to happen, as Holdfast said; but I am not afraid of the *Midget*. She has stood by me in all weathers; and the skipper has taken care that we are prepared for an emergency."

Nevertheless neither Dacres nor the *Midget* had ever previously experienced what followed.

"I should feel more secure if you put your arm around me," she said. None of the crew

was near, and save for the occasional illumination of the lightning, it was pitch dark.

Marcion took the precaution she suggested. He had his right arm around her, his right hand like his left holding firmly to the steel rail above the yacht's side. Dulcima was in the hollow thus formed. There she remained through the awe-inspiring scene save for a few brief moments.

The rain began to descend in torrents, and to spin round them from the contact with the deck.

"You had better go to your cabin," he suggested.

"I cannot. I dare not. Besides, I don't want to."

The last reason was unanswerable.

"I will get our waterproofs. I will not be a minute. Hold firmly to the rail while I am away."

"I don't want you to go," she pouted.

Nevertheless he went ; but was back again almost immediately, and at once shrouded her form in a long mackintosh cape, he himself being provided in the same way.

"I am not afraid now," she said, nestling to him.

In fact the intense atmospheric pressure, the permeating sense of the impending had to a

great extent passed with the coming of that deluge of rain.

They looked out over the black abyss of water to the lights of the craft in the bay dancing and bowing as the sea itself swelled and sank.

The question passed through Dacres' mind, which of them would live to see the dawn of another day?

CHAPTER VIII

PERIL ON THE "MIDGET"

FAR as the eye could see in the wide sweep of the Roads were the lights of countless craft like the fiery eyes of myriads of wild animals gleaming through the darkness. They would suddenly disappear, then reappear in various directions as the wind and tide shifted them in their orbit. The rain hid everything else. Then there came a dull hollow roar of wind. It was the approach of the tornado. A horror of fear seemed in the air such as nature inspires when worked up to some unwonted frenzy of excitement. Marcion, in spite of his life-long experience of the sea, had never known anything like it. He felt Dulcima's small body quiver under his arm. She nestled closer to him. He was so strong, so big, so sure of himself—the quality which of all others inspires confidence.

"I ought never to have let you come—Dulcie!"

The diminutive was so appropriate under the circumstances to that lissome maid masquerading as a boy, that Dacres used it without premeditation.

Dulcima liked the new name—as he said it. She associated it always afterwards with the experiences of that hour, the moaning wind, the driving rain, the smell of the salt in their nostrils, the dancing quivering lights. She felt curiously alone with him, curiously protected by him.

"I would not be anywhere else. I would not have missed it. Oh! not for anything," she whispered.

He looked down upon her, or rather on the outline of her which was alone perceptible.

"What, not in bed?"

"There least of all. Any one can be in bed. But to be here! No one else can be that!"

Did he misunderstand?

"There are plenty of people hereabouts," he said in his calm way.

Yet he thought of the Princess. Would she like to have been where Dulcima was? He doubted it. Then the shadow on the blind recurred to him. Was Stéphanie a traitress? He would clear up that mystery some day.

A couple of minutes had barely passed before

the gale, of which they had had the premonition, was upon them. In spite of its anchors at bow and stern, it seemed to lift the little steamer up, poise it in the air, then drop it into the yawning gulf below. The side of the vessel at which Marcion and his ward were standing plunged downwards, while the obverse side of the *Midget* canted up. There was a great swirl of waters right up to the rail to which Dacres clung with all his force. They were drenched from head to foot as the sea swept over the deck. Dulcima had let go her hold on the rail, and was clinging with both arms to Marcion.

"We shall drown together," she cried.

She believed they were actually in the sea, and that their last moments of life had come. Closer, closer she clung while a great spasm passed over her body. Her red cap had fallen back and the hair she had gathered up under it in a net had rebelliously forced its way out.

"Don't be frightened, Dulcie, we are still safe."

He leant over her to make himself heard. It was so dark that he could not distinguish the exact contour of her head ; but his lips with the salt brine on them were very close to her fair hair. He hardly knew, then or afterwards, whether they actually rested upon it for a second

or two. Did she know? Her breast ceased to heave convulsively. Although still clinging to him with all her force, Dulcima became, by an instantaneous transformation, strangely still. A lifetime of experience, of realisation, of another is sometimes compressed into an infinitesimal space of actual time. A sudden inspiration, an unwonted experience which reveals the character, something passed through in common, any one of these things sweeps away the barrier of reserve which, under ordinary conditions, hedges us all about. For better, for worse, another sees us as God made us with the veneer removed, the outer crust dissolved. It is an ordeal only the few can pass through, and come out of it with an intensified appreciation on the part of the one, or the many to whom he stands disclosed.

Dacres was one of these. Dulcima realised his character in that night episode; and he rose to the heroic in her regard from that time forward. Through her veins, thus brought into closest contact with the man at his best, pulsed the woman. Dulcima was a child, shrewd, far-seeing, in some respects old for her years, but still a child when she was hauled up the side of the *Midget*. Now she was fast becoming a woman, matured to love, to suffer, to feel, to enjoy, to fear.

She was conscious of some such momentous change in that moment when her pulses and the vibration of her heart's strings suddenly stilled.

Marcion lifted his head from bending over her, and looked out over the spuming storm-tossed sea.

The *Midget* was gradually righting itself. The water had swept over the deck and rushed out again, pouring back to the sea from whence it came, from every available spot, the rest rushing through the scuppers at a tremendous pace.

The thunder rolled and the lightning flashed, the latter illuminating a scene destined to live in the memories of all who witnessed it. Many of the vessels had taken precautions similar to those adopted by Captain Holdfast, and after heeling over had righted themselves. One or two had simply disappeared in a single instant, as did the ill-fated cutter in the more open sea of the Channel. A single cry drowned in the turmoil and fury of the elements, and all was over. Marcion's eyes suddenly caught a new danger. A fishing smack—one of several vessels in a similar predicament—had broken from its moorings, and was being driven by the fury of the gale, as it seemed, right on to the *Midget*. The single light visible suddenly

went out; and there was total darkness. Dacres knew the little vessel was heading towards them fast when he last saw the light, but could not tell how long it would be before they felt the force of the collision. If she was struck full, the *Midget* was doomed; the smack was almost certain to go down anyway. The suspense was awful.

The gale was abating fast, and the lightning growing less frequent, and the thunder more distant, indications of the recession of the storm; but as yet its effect on the sea hardly seemed less.

At this moment Captain Holdfast came to his left hand.

"It's all over, sir, if that smack catches us full."

Dulcima caught the words, which had to be uttered out loud to be heard over the wind.

"Does he mean that we shall sink, that we shall all be drowned?" she asked.

"I have brought a couple of belts, sir," Holdfast said. "Better put one round the young man and yourself, sir."

"My nephew," interjected Marcion.

"Beg pardon, sir, young gentleman."

So the fisherman's disguise had deceived the old seaman.

"There is a vessel drifting, which may strike

us," explained Marcion. "I will put a life belt round you. The shore is near and with my help, even if the steamer sinks, we may hope, both of us, to reach it in safety."

Bitterly did Dacres regret that he had yielded to Dulcima's entreaties and allowed her to come. Not so the girl, who had never wavered. Yet she realised that death was near.

"You will keep near me, Uncle Dacres?" she whispered, as she suffered him to fasten the life belt round her waist.

"Do you think I would leave you?" he answered. There was an undertone of tenderness in his voice, which reached the girl's soul, and reassured her.

"If I die and you live, bury me near the sea."

"You must not talk like that. Here it comes!"

A black shape had loomed suddenly out of the mist—the rain had practically ceased. The seamen, as well as themselves, gazed breathless with suspense at the impending hull. It had swerved from its course, and would strike them, if at all, near the stern.

There was a great swirl of water which lifted them up, and then the smack swept past them, just missing the *Midget*, going to its doom on the shore.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Dacres.

Holdfast had turned away, and was already giving orders to have a boat lowered to try and save any one who happened to be on board the smack—most of the crew would probably be on the shore, as the vessel was riding at anchor when the storm burst. The boat, as a matter of fact, did save two out of the three men forming the smack's crew when she struck.

Marcion and Dulcina were left alone.

"Now you are safe," he said.

He expected her to be glad. Instead she was crying. Men do not understand these things—the relief of tears after tension of fear, of anxiety, even after an overstrain of joy.

She was still encircled in his arms. He bent over her. He rested his lips upon her hair, which had a subtle fragrance of its own. He could not have told why he did it; it was his way of expressing sympathy was his explanation to himself. She was a child, whom it was natural to caress—when she was crying and frightened.

The atmosphere was much lighter. He could see the outlines of her face now when their heads were close together. He could see the red lines of her lips. They were lifted towards him. Their lips met. It was her way of expressing thanks for his sympathy. That was all.

For an hour they remained on the deck waiting the return of the rowboat, and the gradual subsidence of the effects of the storm; the storm itself had taken itself off into the dim distance long ago. The hot night grew light towards the early dawn. First one vessel, then another picked itself out from the mist, and became ghostly, then more substantial. They were all like so many birds preening their disturbed feathers after a bath. The ships were making good the ravages of the storm. The *Midget* rose and fell in long rolls.

Dacres and Dulcima hardly spoke during those sixty minutes' pause. It was like an experience taken down rapidly at the time in shorthand, now being written out slowly. They had been into the valley of the Shadow together, and had passed through it hand in hand. To some it means parting: those are the majority; to a few it means a closer union. Dacres and Dulcima were of the latter. Life could never be the same to them, they could never fill the same relationships towards one another, as if that night and its story had never been. Fate had stepped in, and riveted a chain about them whether of gold or iron, neither of them could say. Dacres' kiss was still lingering in Dulcima's hair, and the taste of her lips was fresh upon his lips. These facts were only incidental to the whole.

The girl called him back to the task they had set themselves.

"Is it not time we started?" she said.

Dacres roused himself as if from a dream-sleep.

"You are right. I will speak to Holdfast. But I should think by this time the *Léopard*, with my papers, is at the bottom of the sea. Many a vessel must have gone down in that storm."

As a matter of fact the *Léopard* was at that time making a wide *détour* to avoid the cruiser, and was not very far distant from them in actual mileage.

Captain Holdfast received his orders and rang the engine-room bell. In a few minutes the deck of the *Midget* felt the first throbbings of the engines, and the squirm of the propeller.

The instructions were, "Keep an eye out for the *Léopard*, and for the cutter, last seen in pursuit of her, and failing a sight of either, make at top speed for Havre." It had somehow got about among the crew that the *Léopard* was bound for Havre. There is a freemasonry of information about these things amongst sailors. They seem to know by instinct where a vessel hails from and whither she is bound.

"You had better turn in," suggested Dacres.
"You must be dead tired."

"Oh no, I couldn't."

So Dulcima went and knelt in the supreme corner of the bows of the outgoing *Midget*, looking out over the sea, searching its mystery, and at the same time yearning after the search of the even more mysterious sea of life.

Dulcima felt herself on the threshold of discovery.

CHAPTER IX

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY

FELIX BOISDEFFRE drew up the black bag out of the sea with a smile of satisfaction. They had weathered that storm at any rate literally and metaphorically. He had felt the priceless papers slipping out of his hands when the cutter was gaining upon them hand over hand, and enforcing her injunction to heave to by firing a warning shot uncomfortably close to the *Léopard*. He had felt it still more when the searchlight of Her Majesty's high flyer was turned full upon them disclosing their identity and prying into their secrets.

Now Providence—with a big P—had interposed on their behalf. The cutter had met a well-deserved fate for its meddling by being sent to the bottom of the sea. The cruiser had been provided by the lightning with some amusement on its own account, sufficiently

absorbing to occupy its attention for ample time to allow the *Léopard* to escape. The only drawback was the fact that they had to go back a sufficient distance to get out of its way, and to make a wide *détour*. It was possible that by doing so, they would meet the *Midget* coming in pursuit. Boisdeffre knew that the speedy little vessel belonged to Dacres; and he rightly calculated that the latter would not let the papers go out of his hands without a serious effort to get them back. That chance had to be faced. Boisdeffre dared not attack the armed cutter; but if the worst came to the worst, he would not hesitate to use his quickfirer against the *Midget*. His crew, with the exception of Moreau, was practically unknown to him. They had been selected by some one acting for Président Didot, and had joined at a moment's notice. But he could trust the *esprit de corps* of any body of Frenchmen to fight against their ancient enemy. The only objection to using the quickfirer was the attention it would attract, of which Felix had already had an object lesson in the result of the cutter's gunnery efforts. He hoped therefore that if the *Midget* did catch them, it would not be until they were sufficiently near a friendly harbour on the French coast so as

to be able to run in for shelter at a critical moment.

Boisdeffre did not open the black bag. He regarded it for a moment or two as a miser does his hoard, or a mother her first baby. He could have hugged it. It contained, did it not? 100,000 livres, and the most beautiful wife in Europe—Stéphanie Dolgorouki. It represented the crowning achievement in a life of chicanery and political scheming of the baser sort. Never before had he been engaged in so great an undertaking involving so rich a reward. The throbbing of the engine under his feet was closely akin to the jubilant beating of his heart, now that the oppression of the fear of loss was mercifully removed.

Felix did not require to satisfy himself about the contents of the bag. With his own hands he had let it down, and with his own hands he had hauled it up. That was the whole situation. He locked it away carefully and then went on deck. He was not aware that when he pulled the bag up out of the sea, the operation had been watched from opposite sides by Alphonse Moreau, the skipper of the *Léopard*, and by Jean Crévy, the ship's steward. Had he done so it is doubtful whether Boisdeffre would have cared. They could not appraise the value of the contents of his little parcel

from its exterior, and in any case, the treasure was safe in his locker while the key reposed in his pocket.

By the time Felix stepped out on the deck of the *Léopard*, the tug had got some distance on its course back again towards the English shore. All traces of the storm, the fiercest the English Channel had experienced for many years, had vanished from the sky ; but the long roll of the foam-crested billows testified to its expiring force in the sea. It was nearly half-past two, and the advance light of the coming dawn of what promised to be a splendid day was spreading over the long sweep of the Eastern sky. A few filmy clouds near the horizon were brightening into the hue and appearance of burnished silver.

Boisdeffre saw that the *Léopard* was just changing its course under a direction from the skipper so as to approach its original direction by a wide sweep. The cruiser was no longer in sight. The *Léopard* was heading for the track the British war vessel had passed before the tug attracted its attention.

Felix stepped up on the bridge by the side of Moreau.

"I suppose we are safe in returning so soon?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, quite ; you need not be anxious. We shall not be annoyed again."

Moreau laid a little sarcastic emphasis on the middle sentence of the three. It implied that Boisdeffre was the only person whose mind had been disturbed by the cutter's attentions. They had been "annoyed," he alone had been "anxious."

Felix was nettled at the implication.

"We are all in this affair together," he said. "There will be prize money all round if we win through all right, and nothing for any one if we fail."

"I should be content to take my chance of a share of what the little black bag contains which Monsieur has been so carefully guarding since he came on board the *Leopard*, leaving alone the prize money which was offered when we started."

Boisdeffre coloured to the roots of his hair.

"You would make a bad bargain, Alphonse," he said.

"Monsieur Felix Boisdeffre has no doubt returned to his childhood in the days when they hug maimed idols as if they were of gold and precious stones," said Moreau sarcastically.

"My idol is made of neither gold nor precious stones, anyway," said Felix with affected carelessness.

He knew that the skipper did not stick at trifles, and he could see by his eyes that his

cupidity was thoroughly roused. Boisdeffre thanked his stars that he invariably carried a revolver in a cunningly contrived pocket at the back of his trousers. He flattered himself that, physically, he was more than a match for the skipper; and, with the aid of the revolver, he could probably intimidate the crew as well, if they should side with their captain against him.

"Perhaps!" assented Alphonse. "There are some things more valuable than either," he added sententiously.

Boisdeffre remembered this shot afterwards, and believed that it proceeded from exact knowledge. Now he treated it as a mere experiment in the search for information.

"Anyway," he said, "it is your business to get us to Havre, mine to look after my own affairs."

"No one is likely to understand them as well as Monsieur;" and with that half-compliment, half-sarcasm, the conversation ended.

The Channel was remarkably free from craft of all kinds, doubtless due to the extraordinary storm which had swept it from end to end. In the distance were a few lines of smoke indicating steamers sallying out from various ports. The *Léopard* had the central course entirely to herself. She had proved her seagoing qualities

during the night; and if her speed was not great, the tug was certainly one of the safest boats of her size ever built.

Every five minutes the night became perceptibly clearer, and the light stronger. They were now making by a sinuous course for the French shore. As they advanced, one line of smoke became more and more obvious, picking itself out from the blur of the horizon. The on-coming vessel was bound in the same direction they were, only taking a more direct line, while the *Léopard* had not yet set its course right towards the port of destination.

Gradually a dim outline of the other steamer's bow and part of its side made itself evident to the naked eye.

"That vessel is gaining on us," remarked Boisdeffre.

"Yes, pretty fast."

Moreau had just altered the *Léopard's* course a trifle, so as to make straight for its destination.

"Looks a little like another pursuer!"

"Hardly likely—surely?"

"Don't know."

Boisdeffre left the bridge and went to his cabin to fetch his binocular. When he returned he looked long and fixedly at the approaching vessel. He could not make out any name, but

the following steamer was certainly about the shape and tonnage of the *Midget*. He passed the glass to Moreau, whose eye was more "salted" in such matters.

"It's the little yacht which was anchored near to us last night," was Moreau's unhesitating verdict, "the *Midget*—I think she was called."

"Will she catch us up before we get to port?"

Moreau turned round and looked towards the French coast, now only three or four miles away.

"Not likely," he said.

The port of Havre was unusually crowded with craft, some of the vessels having taken refuge there when the storm threatened.

Felix Boisdeffre went to his cabin to make preparations for landing. After Moreau's remarks about the black bag, he had made up his mind to transfer the precious papers to another hiding-place. The deep pockets of his waterproof overcoat would pretty nearly accommodate them all; and the surplus he must stow about his person.

Felix had only a few things with him unpacked. These he soon arranged. Then he unlocked the sliding panel, and took out the bag from its receptacle. He had put a

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Felix had only a few things with him unpacked. These he soon arranged. Then he unlocked the sliding panel, and took out the bag from its receptacle. He had put a

round shot into it to weight it when he dropped it through the port hole into the sea.

Boisdeffre opened the bag, and turned perfectly livid. Even his lips were white. His hands and knees shook as with a palsy. His tongue formed an exclamation, but he was incapable of uttering it. He dropped the bag on the floor, and himself fell heavily into a deck chair. He had been robbed in his turn. The valise contained nothing except the round shot. Boisdeffre's brain swam. Intellectually paralysed, he could formulate nothing. He hardly knew where he was until he was roused by the slowing up of the steamer. They were arriving at their moorings.

"Monsieur Boisdeffre ! Monsieur Boisdeffre !"

Alphonse Moreau's voice called him. The traitor ! The skipper had seen him drop the bag into the sea. He had pulled it up, taken out the contents, and restored the valise to its place. Felix sprang to his feet. He was himself once more, the strong man, the man of action.

The *Léopard* had stopped, and was being lashed to its mooring. There was not a moment to lose, or Moreau would be on shore first with his booty.

Felix opened his cabin door and shouted—

"Yes, Alphonse, what is it?"

"We have arrived."

"Can you come and help me a minute?"

"All right. I'll be there almost directly."

Boisdeffre grinned—an ugly grin; and then waited behind the cabin door.

CHAPTER X

A STRUGGLE IN THE CABIN

MOREAU was busy with his preparations for going on shore, and giving directions to the men when Boisdeffre called him. It was only when this task was completed that he was free to go to the cabin. He knocked at the door, and as there was no reply, entered. Felix did not want to betray by his voice exactly where he stood. The skipper was, however, quite unsuspecting; in fact the boot was really on the other leg. He entered the cabin with his hands in the pockets of his short blue reefer coat, smoking a cutty pipe. The door slammed to after him, either with its own weight, or from a push by Boisdeffre's foot. In a second Felix, who was much the bigger man of the two, had seized the skipper by the throat, hurling at him a collection of choice French expletives in which the words thief, blackguard, traitor, spy, and other epithets were freely mingled.

Taken by surprise, and off his guard, Moreau was flung back against the partition of the cabin. The pipe snapped between his clenched teeth, and cut his lip. Alphonse tasted the blood, and hardly knowing the cause of it, fancied he was more hurt than he really was. Tough and wiry, and roused to a perfect frenzy of anger, the skipper in his turn seized Boisdeffre by the wrists to free the pressure on his windpipe, and succeeded in releasing his throat. Then began a silent Titanic struggle between the two men within the narrow wooden walls of the cabin. They were not so unevenly matched as would appear at first sight, for what Boisdeffre gained in weight and strength was very nearly compensated by the muscular tension conferred by the sailor's mode of life. Neither of them shouted for help, perhaps disdaining to appeal for it, perhaps recognising that each knew too much of the other to invite the crew to take sides in a combat, the issue of which would mean, at any rate, a tearing on one side of the veil of the past. It was for this reason that Felix had not resorted to his pistol.

Yet both Boisdeffre and Moreau knew that it was a struggle for survival. The fury of Felix was so great that it left no doubt as to his intentions. He meant to squeeze the life out of the skipper. The latter, without under-

standing the meaning of this sudden attack, was exasperated by it to the point of madness. Besides, as a matter of fact, Moreau had been only biding his time to carry out a very similar attempt on his passenger, for the very last reason the latter was likely to suspect, namely, to obtain possession of the black bag and its contents.

Boisdeffre had jumped to too hasty a conclusion, and mentally incriminated the wrong man. It is true that Moreau, his avarice and curiosity thoroughly aroused, had intended to stab Felix in some quiet spot in Havre, and seize the booty. Boisdeffre was right so far in his diagnosis of the skipper's intentions. Where he was wrong was in thinking that Alphonse was the expert thief, who had juggled the papers out of the valise, and at the same time had had the shrewdness to leave the outer case dangling by its cord in the sea. There were at once considerable skill and not a little sarcastic pleasantry in the whole affair, quite beyond the blunter perceptions of the captain of the *Léopard*.

On board the tug was a man who was well fitted for the task he had accomplished, for the simple reason that he had a cleverer brain than either Felix Boisdeffre or Alphonse Moreau. That man was Président Didot's confidante and

âme damnée, the pseudo steward of the *Léopard*, Jean Crévy.

The chapter of accidents favoured Crévy. He saw the bag dropped into the sea. The rest was easy. Boisdeffre was too much taken up with watching the cutter to guard the cabin door. Crévy slipped in, hauled up the parcel, picked the lock of the bag, emptied it of its contents, and restored it to its place. The whole transaction did not take five minutes. Crévy chuckled. It was the best way possible of checkmating Boisdeffre. On board he had a portmanteau with a false bottom. He had brought it with him on purpose. In that hiding-place the precious documents were safe from detection. All his belongings might be overhauled—he had quite counted on that being done in common with those of the rest of the crew—and nothing be found. Boisdeffre had, however, so entirely made up his mind that Moreau was the culprit that he had neglected this elementary process.

Crévy walked on shore with his portmanteau, no man saying him nay, or asking him any awkward questions, while Boisdeffre and Moreau struggled in the cabin.

Round and round the two men went, frequently striking their heads or their shoulders against the walls or some of the fittings of the cabin.

Felix was panting from being out of condition, but his weight and superior strength were telling. The skipper's eyes were standing out of his head in hate and fear—for the fear of death was upon him. By a quick movement Boisdeffre shifted his grasp, and once more had Moreau by the throat. The struggle had now gone on for fully twenty minutes, and the perspiration in great beads streamed off the combatants. There was the sound of voices on deck. Something jarred against the side of the tug, making her shiver slightly from stem to stern. Neither of them heeded, although both were sub-consciously aware that either some other vessel had come alongside, or that the *Leopard* had fouled the jetty. Our brains often have two quite different streams of impressions passing through them at the same time.

Now Moreau would have called out—it was his last chance for life—but the pressure on his windpipe prevented his uttering anything more than a gasp, which could not penetrate even through those wooden walls. The blood was surging about his brain. He had all the feelings of a drowning man. His hands relaxed from their pressure on Boisdeffre's arms. The face of the latter lost its definiteness of outline.

After all, what did it matter? It was nice to go to sleep. Felix banged the skipper's head against the partition—they were in the far corner from the door. Moreau was convinced it was the head of some one else. How big his chest was! It must be bursting. The walls and the door were dancing about, and vague shapes seemed to come out of them, and join the wild orgies. His hands, hanging by his side, were working convulsively, his fingers twisting in and out. He was getting black in the face. Still that relentless grasp gripped his throat like a vice.

"You shall never steal my papers again, you thief and blackguard!" Boisdeffre shouted, as he banged Moreau's head once more.

As he spoke his hands were gripped from behind, and his arms twisted back. So that, in his turn, Boisdeffre cried out in sharp pain from the rough handling of some one stronger than himself. He had not heard the cabin door open in the din he was making. The skipper slid from his enemy's grasp, and would have fallen; but he was suddenly caught and laid gently on the ground. He was breathing stertorously. A couple of small hands unloosed his neckcloth, and some smelling-salts were thrust under his nose. They were very strong, and made him sneeze violently. Prob-

ably those sneezes saved Moreau from an attack of apoplexy. Gradually he began to recover consciousness, and his first intelligent glance found a slim fisher youth kneeling by his side.

Meantime Boisdeffre had found himself half carried, half dragged to the other side of the cabin. He was thrust with no gentle hands on to a locker, and turning round, half-dazed, faced his assailant for the first time.

"I came just in the nick of time to save you from committing murder; you are a precious scoundrel, aren't you?"

Boisdeffre uttered an oath, and his hand slid round to the back of his trousers in search of the pistol he carried there.

"If you don't hold your hands up, I'll shoot you at sight as if you were a mad dog."

There was cold steel against his forehead, which made Boisdeffre shudder. The contrast was all the greater that he was in such a heat himself. He held his hands above his head.

Dacres, for it was he, of course, who had arrived in the nick of time, passed his disengaged hand round at the back of Felix, and removed his pistol. He slipped it instead into his own pocket.

"It is safer with me," he remarked sarcastically. "Now tell me, please, what you did

with the papers you stole from me. You can hand them over as quick as you like."

Boisdeffre sat in a heap, his head bowed into his shoulders. The reaction of the tense struggle he had been engaged in was upon him. He twisted his thumb round towards Moreau. He said sullenly—

"He has them. He stole them from me."

"So you were murdering him for doing to you what you did to me?"

"That's about the size of it," replied Felix cynically; "only he and I were partners, and you and I weren't."

"Arcades ambo," assented Dacres. He turned and strode up to Moreau.

"Now, sir, I don't know your name, but I take it from your dress that you are the captain of this vessel, which I ventured to board. This gentleman"—with a sarcastic emphasis on the word—"says that you have some papers, which were stolen out of my room in England a few hours ago."

Moreau gazed at Dacres bewildered.

"Papers!" he said; "I know nothing of any papers."

Marcion turned to Boisdeffre. The latter staggered to the locker and took out the black bag, exposing its emptiness.

"They were in here," he said; "that villain

knew that its contents were valuable. He opened it when my back was turned. He has them."

Dacres saw that Boisdeffre was convinced of the truth of what he said. He once more turned to Moreau, whose face, all blotched from the strangling he had so recently endured, was anything but a pleasant sight. The skipper raised his hand.

"I swear I have never touched any papers. I did not know the bag contained papers. I knew there was value in it, and I meant to have it. I swear by all that's holy that if the papers were taken out of that bag I never did it. If I did, I'd give them back to you quick enough for saving my life."

Dacres was utterly puzzled, for he was convinced that both men were speaking the truth.

The *Midget* had made a record passage. He himself had caught the thief. Yet the recovery of the priceless documents seemed further away than ever.

Some one had stolen them again. Who was the second thief?

CHAPTER XI

A BELATED PASSENGER

WOMAN'S wit came to the rescue.

Dulcima said, "Would it not be a good thing to find out who has left the ship?"

Captain Holdfast had made a record passage to Havre for a vessel of the *Midget's* tonnage. Dacres had instructed him to draw up alongside the *Léopard*, which they had of course seen steam in and moor by the side of a jetty. He and Dulcima, who was as nimble as a cat, had then boarded the tug, hardly noticed in the confusion of arrival, each man being either taken up with his own concerns or engaged in the necessary arrangements. Marcion had seized upon the first sailor he came across and asked for Boisdeffre's cabin. Before he reached the door he heard the struggle going on, and rushed in to intervene, with results already related. Dulcima rightly judged that none of the men would as yet have left the *Léopard*

unless a very special reason caused one of them to do so. Only the possession of the papers was likely to supply the reason. Hence her suggestion.

"You are right," said Dacres, after a moment's reflection. "The thief has probably bolted already while we were on the wrong track."

He turned to Boisdeffre.

"Mind no more of this business," indicating with a gesture Moreau, who was sitting huddled up on the floor, drinking neat brandy out of a flask.

"I am coming with you," replied Boisdeffre.

Marcion turned the answer over in his mind. It was clear that Boisdeffre had not abandoned hope of cutting in once more for the prize. He was also the sort of man to be moved by a spirit of revenge. The way he had been done by this expert cracksman was likely to rankle in his mind.

"What were you to get out of this business?"

Boisdeffre ground his teeth at having to put his loss into words.

"100,000 livres."

"From whom?"

"That devil Didot," Felix hissed. His eyes gleamed wrathfully.

"Why do you call him that?"

"I hate him—I believe he is at the bottom of this business."

"That is as it may be. In any case I will give you £100,000 if, by your instrumentality, I recover these papers safe and sound *and uncopied*. Of course if I get them back myself you receive nothing."

"I agree," said Boisdeffre.

"Then you shall precede us on deck and ask the questions."

It was a beautiful morning, the sunshine flooding the harbour, radiating the sails of the fishing boats and of the larger merchant craft, reflecting itself in the brass work of the steamers, and decorating the waves with millions of sparkling gems. The air smelt clean, sweet, and cool, refreshed by the storm which had purified the atmosphere by wind and fire.

Boisdeffre piped all hands on deck. They came after a few minutes even to the engineer and firemen—with one exception, the ship's steward.

"Where is Crévy?" Felix asked the mate.

"Gone ashore, sir!"

"Did he take anything with him?"

"He was carrying a portmanteau."

Felix looked at Dacres. There was no doubt where the papers were.

"I guessed it," said Boisdeffre. "I distrusted him from the moment I set eyes upon him."

Marcion looked at his watch.

"He has had more than half an hour's start."

"He is bound to go to Paris. The first express of the day does not leave until eight o'clock," said Felix.

It was then half-past six.

"Is there a slow before that?"

"Yes, there is a stopping train at 7.30, but it arrives later. It shunts out of the way of the mail."

"Those are the only trains to Paris, you say?"

"Yes—for some hours."

"Then we have time to make some arrangements and be at the station to see the slow start?"

"Plenty of time."

"Very well, we will meet at the station at a quarter past seven."

"Agreed."

"You will leave your skipper alone?"

"I shall apologise to him. I did him a wrong. A gentleman apologises." Boisdeffre drew himself up and laid his hand on his heart in theatrical fashion.

Dulcima laughed. She could not help herself.

Dacres smiled grimly.

"If I had not come in and stopped your little game your apology would not have done him much good. What is his name?"

"Moreau."

"Better bring him with you if you can make it straight with him. He may be of use."

"Very well. I will see what he says."

Boisdeffre went to his cabin, while Dacres and Dulcima returned to the *Midget*.

"What are you going to do?" asked Dulcima.

"Give some instructions to Holdfast, and have a wire sent to the Admiralty."

Marcion was going off to Holdfast, who was standing in the bows, but Dulcima touched him on the arm.

"How am I to dress?" she said.

Marcion gazed at her.

"Well, you've started as a boy, and I think for the present you'll have to masquerade as before."

"I can't go to Paris—quite like this. I should attract attention."

"Why not go with Holdfast? I'm going to send him to a charming little spot on the coast." Marcion thought it was a brilliant suggestion.

"What! separate myself from you?" she pouted. There was a quivering under her

blouse. She looked down, then she looked up shyly at him. There was a large tear in each blue eye. It had not struck Dacres before what fine eyes his ward had. It occurred to him now. Having fired a single discharge from her battery, Dulcima again directed her gaze to the deck; but her lip quivered. Two tears starting in parallel lines began to drop silently down her unnaturally bronzed face, leaving two little white streaks where they had displaced the colouring.

Marcion hesitated. Yet he knew he was beaten. Besides, he felt curiously compelled to kiss the quivering, pouting little lips, and to remove the twin tearlets by the same process.

"I've been of use to you twice already."

"I should miss you if you left me—certainly," Marcion confessed.

It was true. He had just become aware of it. He could not, however—ungrateful man!—recollect the precise services his ward had rendered.

"I don't mean to leave you. I mean to come."

"Then what do you propose?"

"To buy a suit in Havre. It is full of ready-made clothes shops."

"How do you know? You have not been there before?"

"No ; but all seaside places are."

Marcion reflected, not for the first time, that, in some respects, his ward had not much to learn.

"I will get a suit you won't be ashamed to take me to Paris in."

"You cannot go by yourself?"

"Can't I?" She laughed, showing two beautiful rows of pearly teeth. Sunshine had succeeded to threatened storm.

Dulcima turned away. She would have to cross by the *Léopard* to reach the jetty.

"I will have breakfast ready for you by the time you return," Marcion called after her.

Dulcima nodded her acquiescence to the suggestion in her own graceful little way. Then she tripped across the plank which connected the *Midget* with the *Léopard*, and so on to the jetty. Dacres watched her. It was an astonishment to him that in so short a time Dulcima could have become so real to him. Her individuality was at once so clear and yet so illusive, so open and yet so piquante. He no longer liked to think of her going about by herself—away from him. Marcion would have done much for his ward for the sake of her dead father. He was beginning to realise that he would soon do a great deal more for her own.

She disappeared on the quay to rouse up some sleepy purveyor of ready-made clothes. Then, when he could no longer distinguish that small, boyish form, Dacres went over to speak to Holdfast. He drew the latter to the furthest end of the *Midget*.

"I have to go to Paris, and I want you to run round to Cervette" (a small harbour the *Midget* had often anchored in). "I may come to you or send to you at any moment. So be ready to start at any time. Say nothing to the crew of where you are going, and do not let them land while at Cervette, except by my orders. My Paris address will be Hôtel Servati, Rue de Monceau."

"I understand, sir."

"Let the steward lay breakfast for two in a quarter of an hour."

"Yes, sir."

Dacres went into his cabin and wrote a cipher telegram to Sir Edwin Sykes stating what had happened, giving his promise to Boisdeffre, which he knew beforehand Sir Edwin would sanction, and stating his prospective address at Paris. He intended to despatch this message on his way to the station.

Boisdeffre also despatched a telegram to London before joining his new allies. It was to Princess Dolgorouki, and ran—

"Robbed of my prize and reward. Meet me Paris usual address soon as possible."

At the station there was some hoarding up because of repairs being carried on. Boisdeffre concealed himself behind this protection while Marcion and Dulcima—the latter now dressed very quietly in a boy's clothes suited to the middle and upper classes—waited openly on the platform. Moreau was to follow later in the day. They were already supplied with tickets for Paris. Dacres was, of course, unknown to Crévy, as the latter was to himself, but he had received a sufficiently accurate description of the steward to be able to distinguish him. There were very few passengers, mostly farmers and purveyors of poultry and vegetables going to a local market. One thing was certain, Crévy was not among them.

The stopping train moved off, and after a quarter of an hour's waiting the express backed to the platform. It was empty when it came in; Marcion and Dulcima, one starting from each end, assured themselves of the fact. The time passed. Only five minutes remained. Boisdeffre came out of his hiding-place. There was no sign of Crévy.

What were they to do? Turn back and look for him in Havre, or go on to Paris and watch the terminus? After some hesita-

tion and within a minute or two of the time of departure the former course was decided upon.

Hardly had they taken their seats when the train started. They had the compartment to themselves. Instead of getting up steam rapidly, they all noticed how slowly the mail was going. After they had passed the furthest length of the station and were emerging into the open country the brake was suddenly applied. They could feel its vibration. Marcion and Boisdeffre jumped up simultaneously and looked out of the window. At the side of the line there was a siding for coal, by which a plank ran along. When they looked out they saw a man standing on this plank. He opened a carriage door close to the engine. One of the officials of the line helped him into the carriage. He had a portmanteau in his hand.

It was Jean Crévy.

CHAPTER XII

BOISDEFFRE SCORES A POINT

MARCION and Boisdeffre exchanged glances of congratulation. Their bird was snared.

"He has got into the train," Dacres said to his ward. Dulcima alone of the three had not seen the new arrival. There was not room for more than two at the window.

"How did he manage to have the train slowed down for him?" asked Marcion of Boisdeffre, after they had settled down in their places.

"A Government order, or a big sum of money," replied Felix, shrugging his shoulders, "probably the former."

"I don't quite see what this M. Crévy gained by his manœuvre," put in Dulcima quietly. "He must have known that he would be seen; in fact the train pulling up rather attracted attention to him than otherwise. It was about

as fatuous a thing as he could do—and hitherto he has not suggested himself as a fool, this M. Crévy."

"He at any rate gained that I should not ride in the same compartment with him," said Boisdeffre, twisting his big moustache fiercely. "*Ciel!* I would have had those papers out of the portmanteau before the train had gone a league." Felix tapped the butt end of his pistol significantly. "As it is, this train does not stop until it gets to Paris. Then no doubt Monsieur Crévy, being near the engine, looks to render himself scarce before we can get out."

Boisdeffre turned to Marcion—

"We shall both be in this. What is to be my share if we recover the papers together?"

"A half certainly, possibly more."

Boisdeffre visibly brightened at this response. The train rushed on through the smiling cornfields and orchards of Normandy. Dacres and Dulcima slept throughout the journey. They were both thoroughly tired out, not having had a wink of sleep throughout the whole of the preceding night. They roused themselves for a moment when the mail whizzed through Rouen, and again as it clattered through Nantes after some violent whistling in both cases; but the break in their slumbers was of minute duration. Nature reasserted itself.

Boisdeffre was wide awake. He was thinking. The cornfields and vineyards, the forests of fruit trees, did not interest him. He was going over the incidents of the past few hours; for they were really little more. He saw again his own clumsy action in knocking over a photograph stand when jealousy stirred within him in the apartment of Princess Stéphanie, as he felt rather than heard Marcion being drawn into her toils of pseudo-love—an action which nearly betrayed his presence. Then he saw the study at the Moyle, and this man, who was opposite to him now slumbering peacefully, poring over his precious plans, a quickly delivered blow, and Dacres lies stunned at his feet. Marcion had forgiven that cowardly attack, and even promised him a rich reward for his services. "How calm, how forgiving, how phlegmatic these Englishmen are!" Boisdeffre smiled sarcastically as he twisted his moustache. His countrymen were not like that. There was Moreau, for instance, like a bear with a sore head, because by a pure mistake he had nearly strangled him. He was coming to Paris to oblige this Monsieur Dacres, whom he regarded as having saved his life, as soon as he had paid off the crew of the *Leopard*; he would not have come for him—Boisdeffre. He would

rather have knifed him than gone a step to do his bidding, Moreau had told him. Then his thoughts ran on to the incidents of the voyage—that terrific storm, the pursuit of the cutter, and the searchlight of the cruiser. He had seemed wonderfully in luck so far when he had escaped both perils. But the turn came with the rifling of the bag—as it always does. No man could pocket the red every time. Crévy! Didot! Boisdeffre anathematised them both.

Now he hoped the luck was on the turn again. They had Crévy safe under their hands. It was long odds against their allowing him to escape a second time. Still he, Felix, was only to get half those hundred thousand livres. Would Stephanie marry him on fifty thousand livres after enjoying all that luxury in Park Lane? He very much doubted it. She was a woman who liked her lap full of money and to spend it when she had got it with both hands. But what a splendid creature she was. What a model of a woman, with her beautiful face and matchless figure! He must have her.

Boisdeffre had hardly hitherto paid any attention to the boy who was Dacres' companion. He seemed to be pretty shrewd, and to have his head screwed the right way on his shoulders. Now Boisdeffre looked at the strip-

ling. The cap Dulcima wore had got displaced a little, as her head naturally found a more comfortable resting place. Most of her hair was drawn up into an invisible net; but one rather too long and rebellious lock had escaped and hung down her shoulders. A look of inquiry passed across the Frenchman's face. His eyes travelled to the long, golden lashes, and then the gentle rise and fall of Dulcima's breathing. On the fingers were marks where rings had been. Boisdeffre laughed to himself.

Dulcima's secret was no longer her own and her guardian's, for Felix shared it.

Boisdeffre was still thinking. He could not get out of his head those fifty thousand livres which the new bargain with Dacres deprived him of. They might mean so much to him—the loss of the dearest wish of his life. After all, why should he lose them? He had a brain, and was not over-scrupulous about methods. Could not his brain devise a plan? If he alone got hold of Crévy and his portmanteau, and compelled his quondam steward to yield up the booty, he could make his own terms with Didot, or sell the plans to some one else. He drummed gently on the window. Should he or should he not? Once more Felix grinned as he had grinned behind the door of his cabin on the *Léopard*, when he had summoned

Moreau to come and help him. He had some useful things in a small portmanteau under the seat. Already the train was slackening a little. In a few minutes it would be too late! Boisdreffre drew the portmanteau out noiselessly, and, opening it, after a little search found what he wanted.

The mail had been at a standstill some minutes when a porter opened the door of the carriage in which the three travellers had been seated, looking to see if any chance papers had been left behind. Boisdreffre was gone; but the porter was surprised to see that an older and a younger man remained, evidently wrapped in profound slumber. In the air was a faint, sweet odour. Failing to rouse them, he fetched other officials, and it was soon clear that both were under the influence of a narcotic, how or by whom administered it could not be told. The two travellers were conveyed to a waiting-room, and a doctor was soon in attendance. By his efforts first Dulcima, then Marcion Dacres, was roused to consciousness, although the return to anything like understanding of where they were was more protracted.

As soon as Dacres had gained some grasp of the situation, he asked that they might be driven to their hotel. The station-master

was inclined to demur, but was eventually satisfied with Dacres' card and their assurance that he would be found if required. As they did not complain of any actual violence or robbery, it did not seem a matter for the police.

The drive in the open air revived them. Marcion had telegraphed from Havre for two bedrooms and a sitting-room. Boisdeffre had given Moreau the address; so the latter would certainly call there on his arrival in Paris. The proprietor of the hotel, which was in the Rue de Monceau, was an Italian named Servati, whom Dacres had known for many years. The travellers were received with every mark of distinction. Both Marcion and his companion would have passed for Frenchmen. It was perhaps as well, for Paris was filled with excited crowds, and at this time English travellers were liable to receive treatment the reverse of hospitable.

Marcion ordered *déjeuner* in their private sitting-room, and in the meantime both the travellers went to their respective apartments to dissipate with cold water the after-effects of their hurried journeys and of the chloroform, which had fortunately been administered in very small quantities.

Hardly a sentence was interchanged until

the meal was half over. Marcion's brow was clouded. He was bitterly chagrined and angry.

"Another time, Dulcima, one of us will watch while the other sleeps in the presence of the enemy."

Dulcima, for once, was a little crestfallen.

"I thought," she said, "that that brute Boisdeffre realised that his interests were now bound up with ours. Otherwise I would have kept myself awake with a pin."

"I was fool enough to think so too. It is clear Boisdeffre judged otherwise. He has done me twice, and on each occasion knocked me out of time. He will find it more difficult to effect a third *coup*. I shall not be inclined to handle him quite so gently."

"You offered him half the reward even if you helped him to get the papers from Crévy."

"He evidently wanted the whole—but he will not now get it from me."

CHAPTER XIII

A SECRET COMPARTMENT

FELIX BOISDEFFRE quite enjoyed carrying out his little plan in the railway carriage. There was something so simple about it and yet so effective. He dropped an infinitesimal quantity of chloroform out of a phial on to a handkerchief, and then allowed each of his fellow travellers to inhale a little in turn. Boisdeffre did not wish to run any risks of fatal results. All he cared about was to dull their senses sufficiently to give him a start and prevent their sharing in his pursuit of Crévy. After this delicate operation, Felix sat and surveyed them as the train slowed down into Paris. It would be amusing to see them awake to find themselves outwitted, their fellow-traveller and ally bolted. He pictured it all while he drew his pistol from his pocket at the back and looked at the priming. He might find it a valuable argument in bringing Crévy

to his senses. The latter was no doubt a man of courage as well as resource. Otherwise he would not have been selected for the difficult mission he had so far carried out successfully. Boisdeffre did not expect Crévy to give up without a struggle; but with the aid of his pistol and his superior strength—for Crévy was a smaller, slighter man than himself—he had no doubt of the result.

The train stopped, and Boisdeffre jumped out. He saw that Crévy had lost no time in doing the same. Yet the latter lingered for a moment, apparently to speak to some one in the carriage he had just quitted. They were neither of them impeded with luggage other than each carried in his hand. There was consequently none of that inevitable delay which is so exasperating to a man in a hurry at a French terminus.

Crévy jumped into a closed cab with his portmanteau. Boisdeffre was just in time to see the cab departing. He picked out a good horse and told the driver of the *voiture* to follow the first cab, if possible to overtake it without attracting attention. The Parisian cabman is not addicted to hurry. For about half a mile the two vehicles maintained very much the same relative positions. Then the driver of the first cab took a short cut down a

narrow street. A heavy dray got in the road, one of the fine horses dragging it having become unmanageable, owing to some of its harness having got out of place. Consequently the second cab advanced close up to the rear of the first. Boisdeffre blessed the luck which had so evidently turned in his favour. He jumped out, handed a couple of francs to the driver, told him to deposit his bag in the Rue Patelier, No. 17, and himself walked up to the first *voiture*. There was a crowd and some excitement, as the dray-horse was plunging a good deal and kicking.

Crévy's attention was so taken up with what was going on in front that he did not realise any one had his grasp on the door handle until Boisdeffre had stepped in, and was sitting by his side. Then he turned and looked at the intruder.

Didot's *âme damnée* was a man with a ferret-like face, sharp-cut features, small beady, black eyes, thin lips, high forehead. Crafty, cruel, any one versed in physiognomy would have decided were the alliterative characteristics which accompanied those features. He was dressed in an irreproachable morning suit, and looked very different from the Jean Crévy who had booked as steward on the *Léopard*. Surprised Crévy may have been, disconcerted he

certainly was not. Felix was surprised to see a faint smile flicker round his mouth.

"Monsieur Boisdeffre does me the honour to share my *voiture*. He is welcome, of course, very welcome, but his mode of entrance is a little—shall we say," Crévy waved a pair of gold-rimmed *pince-nez* in the air—"a little unconventional?"

For answer Felix drew his pistol out of his pocket, and held it in his right hand. He said nothing.

"Monsieur goes about armed. He anticipates danger perhaps? Paris is a little disturbed just now. But it has not come to barricades yet."

"What is the good of talking all that nonsense, Crévy?" asked Boisdeffre roughly. "There is a bullet in that pistol for you, unless you do what you are told, and do it pretty quickly."

Crévy shrugged his shoulders.

"Monsieur is dictatorial. We are not now on board the *Léopard*. It is easy to call for help in these streets, or to summon the police. But if Monsieur will indicate what it is he wishes, I will tell him whether I can comply with it or not."

"You know quite well what I want, and will have, police or no police—those papers you stole on the *Léopard*."

"Papers!" exclaimed Crévy, with a look of mild inquiry; "has Monsieur, then, lost some papers?"

Boisdeffre swore.

"What is the good of all this prevarication? You know perfectly well it won't go down with me. You sneaked into my cabin, drew up a bag I had lowered into the water when the cutter came after us, stole the documents it contained, and dropped the bag into the sea again. When an opportunity offered you sneaked off with the papers in the portmanteau you have now at your feet."

"These papers of which you speak belonged to you?" inquired Crévy, in a tone of mild inquiry.

Boisdeffre flushed. He was accusing a thief of abstracting stolen goods, and the thief knew it as well as he did.

"Yes, they were mine when you took them."

"Ah!" said Crévy, and he leant back in the cab as if he was thinking. Boisdeffre might have been a hundred miles away. The latter was getting decidedly angry. Somehow he felt he was not getting the best of it. He ought to have been master of the situation by all the laws of the game, but he felt he wasn't.

"What the devil do you mean by that, 'ah'?"

Crévy again turned to the big, angry man with something of the same gesture one would use to an irritable child.

"I beg pardon," he said; "I was thinking. I had forgotten Monsieur. Will Monsieur kindly tell me in plain words what he wants, and I will endeavour to comply with his wishes."

"I have already told you. I want those papers."

"Still those papers!" Crévy gave a weary sigh and waved his glasses. "Will Monsieur kindly indicate where they are?"

"In that portmanteau," Boisdeffre indicated it by kicking it. He was just as angry as Crévy was calm.

"It is at your disposal to examine it; kindly not to kick it, however." Crévy with these words took a key out of one of his waistcoat pockets and handed it to Boisdeffre. The latter laid his pistol down on the seat of the *voiture*, and eagerly stretched out his hands to the portmanteau. Had Crévy chosen, he could easily have possessed himself of Boisdeffre's pistol at this juncture by merely stretching out his arm behind its owner's back. He, however, had not the slightest intention of doing anything of the

kind. In fact, he hardly seemed interested in what was going on in the cab, being far more intent upon the drayman's difficulties with the refractory horse.

Boisdeffre opened the portmanteau eagerly. It contained the suit of clothes Crévy had worn as steward of the *Léopard* on one side, and a dressing case with other toilet requisites on the other. There were no papers even in the flap pocket into which Felix inserted his big hand.

Crévy turned to Boisdeffre.

"Is Monsieur satisfied?"

Felix growled. "The papers are not in there, anyway. You have hidden them somewhere else!"

"Monsieur does not know much about portmanteaus?" inquired Crévy with a tone of one seeking for information in an impersonal scientific way. "If Monsieur will take the trouble to look carefully, he will notice that the space inside is not commensurate with the external measurement, even allowing for the thickness of the leather."

It began to dawn upon Boisdeffre's not too nimble intellect.

"You mean that it has a hidden space, a false bottom, or something of that kind?"

"Exactly."

Felix was mystified. Why should Crévy

have imparted this information? Clearly he was playing with him. He would not have told him about the concealed apartment if it had contained anything of value. Boisdeffre was sulky. He would rather a man had hit him than made, or attempted to make, a fool of him.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he said roughly. "Do you think I believe the papers are there after what you have told me."

"Nevertheless, it would be a good thing for Monsieur to complete his task as he has begun," said Crévy gently.

What bitter irony all this seemed to Boisdeffre when he mentally traversed the whole scene afterwards.

The dray-horse had by this time been reduced to order, and the harness repaired which had been broken. The *voiture*, released from its temporary imprisonment, moved on. Crévy leant out of the window, and told the driver to proceed at a walking pace. Then he turned again to Felix.

"I will instruct you how to open the concealed compartment. It is a clumsy affair," Crévy waved his *pince-nez* deprecatingly. "A sharp child could have devised something better. Press the button of the pocket flap and then pull it sharply to the right."

Boisdeffre, though convinced of its inutility, felt impelled to do what he was told. Directly he did so, a tiny keyhole was disclosed. Crévy handed him a small key. It turned in the lock easily, but nothing resulted.

"That is all humbug," said Boisdeffre angrily.

"Monsieur is impatient. Knock the port-manteau sharply on the side where the flap is."

Felix did so. The side came out bodily. Only the false drawer remained. It was full of papers. Boisdeffre's eyes gleamed. They were what he was looking for, as he could see at a glance. They represented 100,000 livres—and the most beautiful woman in the world. Even in his tense excitement and exhilaration a doubt crossed his mind, why had Crévy given himself away? Why had he told a secret he might have kept so easily to himself? He was too bewildered, and besides too delighted to puzzle it out.

He stretched out his hand to seize the spoil when he was arrested by a sentence, very quietly spoken.

"I do not advise you to touch those papers. For if you do, you are a dead man in half a second."

CHAPTER XIV

CONFOUNDED

FELIX BOISDEFFRE had an idea that he was pretty well versed in the school of human nature and in the language of faces. He discovered that morning in the cab that he had still much to learn. At the sharp word of command, and explicit warning, he withdrew his hand, and turned to look at Crévy. The latter was just as calm, just as collected as he had been before. He might have been discussing the crops, but there was an ominous glitter in his eyes, and a hardness about his mouth. Felix instinctively drew his right hand back towards his pistol, which still lay on the seat.

"Leave that pistol alone. It will not serve you."

Boisdeffre, under the influence of a wonderful fascination, did as he was bid.

"Now close that portmanteau."

Pale to his lips, afraid of the intangible, the unknown, nevertheless Felix disobeyed.

"I'll see you to —— first," he said. This man was weaker, smaller than he, Boisdeffre tried to remind himself. Why should he be afraid of him even without his pistol. Yet with all his self-persuasion, he knew he was afraid of the man into whose presence he had intruded, and whom a few minutes ago he had presumed to threaten.

"I will give you ten seconds," the quiet voice announced. It was the sentence of a judge on the bench, from which there is no appeal.

Boisdeffre, from white, flushed crimson, but he did what he was told. He snapped the fastening of the secret drawer, and then locked up the portmanteau, handing back the two keys to Crévy with a hand he knew was shaky, and cursed himself for his own want of self-control.

"Thank you. You have not quite forgotten how to obey."

It began to dawn upon Boisdeffre that he had heard that voice before apart from his brief experience on the *Léopard*, although Crévy's face was, he was sure, quite unfamiliar to him. The tones had altered since the change in their relationship to one another.

The cab drew up at a tall narrow house in the Rue de Varennes.

"Hand me your pistol and get out!"

Boisdeffre gripped the weapon, and turned with a half-grin to Crévy.

"Suppose I shoot you instead?"

The cabman had jumped off the box. He now opened the door, giving his fare a military salute. He did not seem surprised to find that there were two gentlemen inside—all that the cab was built to hold—instead of only the one traveller with whom he had started.

"Be quick," said Crévy.

Felix handed over the pistol, and Crévy pocketed it. Then they both got out on to the pavement. The driver handed out the portmanteau, placed it on the step of the house, and rang the bell.

"I shall want you to-night at ten o'clock."

The cabman saluted again. He was a tall, well-built, well-drilled man.

"Not before, sir?"

"Not before."

The cabman got on his box and drove away. There were very few people in the street. In the distance was a policeman. Boisdeffre began to recover his courage now that he was out of that close confinement, and in the open air. He came to the con-

clusion that he had been made a fool of by his own craven imaginings. Like most men of his class, he took refuge in bluster.

"You don't fancy I'm going to let you carry off those papers, which you have stolen from me, in that easy fashion? You have carried the game of bluff rather too far, Monsieur Crévy, or whatever you please to call yourself."

Felix laid his hand on the portmanteau.

The door of the house opened, and a tall footman in black stood in the entrance. Another man similarly attired was within the hall.

Crévy took no notice of Boisdeffre's remark, but simply directed the man-servant to take the portmanteau into the library. Then he turned to Felix, who had risen from his stooping posture, seeing that he was outnumbered.

"Come," he said; "I want you!"

The master of the house took Boisdeffre's arm above the elbow between his thin finger and thumb. In that instantaneous grip Felix not only recognised the physical strength latent in that apparently puny body, but experienced again the mesmeric influence of the man. He had come in contact with a gigantic will power, and he knew it.

The footman preceded them through the

hall and up some richly-carpeted stairs. On the wide landing he threw open a door, leaving the way open for the two men to enter. The apartment was of considerable height and width, and lined from floor to ceiling with books. In the centre was a round mahogany table with writing materials upon it. There were few ornaments in the room except some valuable china on side-tables. Crévy waved his visitor to a chair at the central table, and told the footman to leave the portmanteau on the floor. When the servant had withdrawn the host sat down on an arm-chair opposite the writing-desk.

"You will excuse me a minute," he said to Boisdreffre, and, taking a sheet of notepaper, wrote a few lines upon it. Felix watched him as he wrote, and as he watched, became more and more conscious of the strength of that ferret-like face. Here was a man who would let nothing stand in the way of his projects; who could be cruel for a purpose, if cruelty were a means to an end.

When Crévy had finished writing he folded up the document, put it in an envelope, and sealed it. This completed, he touched a small electric bell on the table once. The bell had a soft, silvery tone. It was answered by a gentleman, who came in through a door which was

hidden behind a screen near the fireplace. Crévy nodded to the newcomer, who was slim and rather good-looking in the typical French fashion, with black moustache and pointed beard.

"The reports?" he said briefly.

"They are here, sir."

The secretary, for such he was, laid some documents on the table, which Crévy scanned carefully. No notice had been taken of Boisdreffre, who felt as if he were the victim of some nightmare. When the perusal was finished Crévy handed the envelope he had just sealed to his secretary, indicating what was to be done with it by laying his finger on the address. Then he stooped down, unlocked the portmanteau, opened the secret compartment, and took out the papers.

"These are the documents I went for. Place them in the third drawer of the cabinet. I have not had time to look them through yet."

Boisdreffre jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing. He regarded this as pure insolence.

"I protest against those papers being moved. I will not have it. They are mine."

The secretary looked at Boisdreffre for the first time, then to his employer, apparently for instructions. Crévy shrugged his shoulders.

"There is room in the Asylums at present, I presume?"

Boisdeffre banged his clenched fist down on the table, making the inkstand and the pens rattle.

Crévy looked at him, and said coldly—

"I do not allow any noise in this room."

"You do not allow! Who are you that talks as if you were a king or an emperor at least?"

"It does not at present matter much who I am. *Your* identity is of more importance just now, M. Boisdeffre."

"My identity! Every one knows who I am. I do not pose at one time as the steward of a small steamer, and at another as a fine gentleman with lackeys at my bidding."

"Every one may not know who you are," said Crévy, taking up his words; "but I do."

He walked round to the side of Boisdeffre and whispered something into his ear. For a moment Felix turned as if he would have struck him. Crévy held up a thin sheath he had drawn out of his pocket, out of which protruded a sharp point.

"This is poisoned," he said; "a touch is death."

But Boisdeffre had already abandoned his first intention. He sat down heavily on the

chair from which he had risen. His face was mottled, streaks of white showing through the red. The secretary had taken not the slightest notice of this scene, either too well trained, or too certain of the inevitable *dénouement*. He now carried out his instructions, and then left the apartment noiselessly, as he had come in—by the concealed door.

Crévy returned to his place.

“You were doubtless under the impression that a change of place, the lapse of time, and certain little alterations you have thought it good to make in your personal appearance would have concealed your identity, that Auguste Lecomte would pass unrecognised as Felix Boisdeffre. In coming to that conclusion you underrated at once the charm of your own striking individuality, and the acuteness of those to whom you promised obedience as the price of your life.” The last words were said very sternly.

Boisdeffre winced as if he had been struck, or were in actual physical pain.

“It may interest you to know,” Crévy went on in the quiet tones he had used before, “that on the contrary, the greatest attention has been paid to your movements.”

He crossed the room to the cabinet in the third drawer of which the secretary had placed

Marcion Dacres' plans. From the lowest drawer, after he had unlocked it with one of a bunch of keys he took from his pocket, Crévy drew out a bundle of papers. He selected one, and going over to Felix, laid it on the table before him.

Boisdeffre took it up. His hand shook as he held it, and his will had to compel his brain to take in what was before his eyes. The paper was headed "Auguste Lecomte." Below was given a list of aliases by which the said Auguste Lecomte had chosen to be known at different periods and in various countries, ending with his present designation of Felix Boisdeffre. Underneath was written his life in terse periods. The document was in two different inks, red and black. The red had to do with events which constituted crimes against the laws of the countries in which he had chosen to reside, the black filled in the comparatively innocuous blanks.

Through the apartment the hot August air came from the open windows with oppressive weight. There was a dull droning of flies. On the mantelpiece a clock ticked. Crévy sat quite still in his chair. He was letting his power permeate slowly through this man. For knowledge is power—power to hurt, sometimes.

Great beads of perspiration rose on Boisdeffre's brow. His short-cropped hair stirred on his head. That record placed in the hands of the police of at least three countries in Europe would sign his death warrant. Felix looked from under his eyes at his persecutor. What an insignificant man to hold this power over him! Apparently Crévy was not watching him, not attending; his eyes had gone to the open window, and he was evidently in a reverie. Boisdeffre had been in perilously tight places before this and had extricated himself from them. If he could only silence this man, kill him if there was no other way, he might escape with that fatal list and the papers which Crévy had stolen from him and were worth a king's ransom. He had only a couple of seconds to come to determination. Then he sprang forwards, intending to bear his antagonist to the ground by his superior weight, and choke the life out of him before he could raise a cry, or reach a weapon.

Crévy sat perfectly still. But before Boisdeffre, quick as he was, spurred on by hatred and fear, could reach him, he was seized from the back, and a couple of iron arms squeezed his to his side, and crushed the breath out of his chest. Felix could not see his captor; but he knew the game was up. His strength was

as nothing compared to that which was pitted against him.

Crévy smiled a pitiless smile into Boisdeffre's baffled face and bloodshot eyes.

"You are a brave man, Monsieur Lecomte, and will no doubt be useful when you have thoroughly learnt your lesson."

To the attendant who had seized him, the master of the house gave a gesture to indicate that he was to be released.

The man disappeared as silently and expeditiously as he had come.

Boisdeffre stood crestfallen, amazed, beaten, panting for the breath which had been squeezed out of him.

"Please stretch out your hand."

As soon as the command was obeyed Crévy did the same, and the two right hands met, Boisdeffre standing, the other sitting.

"Release your hand."

Boisdeffre struggled with all his might. He could not get away. He was in a vice.

"You have made a miscalculation, Monsieur Lecomte—you are not the first who has done the same;" and with a quick turn of that steel wrist, Crévy brought Boisdeffre to his knees.

"If you are satisfied," he said quietly, "you can go back to your chair."

CHAPTER XV

THE AMBASSADOR'S WARNING

NEITHER Dacres nor Dulcima ate their *déjeuner* with any satisfaction or appetite. They were still feeling the ill effects of the slight dose of chloroform which had been administered to them. In addition, Dacres was nonplussed as to his future action, and crestfallen at the turn events had taken. Mental anxiety and fatigue lined his brow, making him look years older. He revolved in his mind what he should do. Boisdeffre, Crévy, and, worse than all, the important papers which he had pledged to recover had vanished into space. How was he to find them in a great city like Paris? In a few hours, doubtless, they would be copied, and even if he recovered the originals, the copies would remain to be used when occasion offered. That occasion might offer at any time. The French papers were full of staring head-

lines, displaying the state of tension against England. There was talk of a fracas between French fishermen and Canadians on the Newfoundland coast, in which an English gunboat had taken part, of course on behalf of the Colonists. "A spark would set fire to a barrel of gunpowder if only a few grains were exposed. It was known that Président Didot favoured an anti-British policy. The Ambassadors might have their letters of recall at any moment. Then the papers stolen from Marcion would be inestimable. He pondered these things and wondered what he should do. Should he go to the Président and state the theft, and that he knew the thief was in Paris? What use would that be? The French Government was, if nothing worse, a sleeping partner in the transaction, and would benefit by its success. Should he watch the Elysée, into which, as he knew from the papers, Didot had only just moved? The idea was impracticable. The entrances and approaches were guarded by the police. If he were found loitering in the Faubourg St. Honoré, he would soon be treated as a suspicious person, and ordered off, or arrested. The recent activity of the anarchists, and the known hatred of the new Président by thousands in the capital, had caused the greatest precautions to be taken,

Should he go to the English Ambassador, Sir Gervais Montrose? There could be no harm in telling him what had happened, although it was more than doubtful whether he could help in any way, or suggest anything.

"I think I shall go and talk things over with the English Ambassador. He may think of something to suggest."

"There can be no harm in that," assented Dulcima. She was sitting at the table, her head resting on her hands. She looked a perfect child in her boy's dress, a tired child with dark circles under her eyes. Dacres was summoned out of his abstraction by noticing the weary look in the large eyes.

"You must rest, Dulcie, while I am away—I shall not be long."

"I do not like to let you go without me."

"Nevertheless you must."

Dacres crossed over, and put his arm round the girl's shoulder. She was overwrought, and bending her head on the table, burst into a passion of tears.

"I am so useless," she said; "and I meant to have been so useful."

"You are of great use to me, Dulcie," he whispered; "I should be miserable if I were alone."

She looked up, with great tears standing in

her eyes, turning half round so as to see his face.

"Is that true?" she asked; "really and truly true, you know, Uncle Dacres?"

He smiled down at her. Their faces were very close together.

"Yes, it is really and truly true," he declared, repeating her formula.

"Then I don't mind a bit. I will go and have a rest, and when you return I shall be quite fresh to help you, and I know we shall succeed."

Marcion smiled himself to see the sunshine breaking out over her tear-stained face.

She got him his hat and stick, and stood in the doorway to see him off.

"Could you not find out," she suggested, "where this Monsieur Crévy lives—if he has a house in Paris? It seems to me that he, more than Boisdeffre, is the person to be looked for?"

"Perhaps you are right. At any rate I might look out both Crévy and Boisdeffre in the directory, and probably I shall find the residence of one of them."

Marcion was turning to go.

"You are not going like that," she pouted.

Dacres turned round in surprise.

"Why not?" he said. "I think we have said all there is to be said."

"Yes, but we have not done all there is to be done," she mimicked his tones.

"I don't understand," he said.

"How stupid you men are! Why, you have not even kissed me. Do you think I'm going to be left all alone in Paris without even a kiss to keep me company?"

Marcion complied. Their lips met. Hers were luscious and ripe. It was rather a nice kiss.

"I think you are fond of kissing," Marcion remarked by way of a lecture, but hardly with sufficient emphasis of disapproval.

"It all depends who it is that has to be kissed," laughed Dulcima, as she tripped off up the stairs towards her own apartment. When she had taken a turn on the first landing, she leant over and looked down at Marcion, who had been watching her light form as she sped upstairs.

"I don't mind kissing you, Uncle Dacres; but I wouldn't do it to just any one, I promise you."

As Marcion walked along the crowded boulevards, two strands of thought ran through his mind; one had to do with the all-important subject of the recovery of the lost papers, the other with that provoking, fascinating, alluring face looking over the banister, an enticing

paradox, a girl in boy's clothes. The sentence drummed in his ears, "I don't mind kissing you, Uncle Dacres; but I wouldn't do it for just any one, I promise you." It was a mystery to Marcion that such should be the case, that anything could obtrude on his thoughts, when everything pointed to concentration on the all-important quest.

Dacres' height and athletic build attracted a certain amount of attention as he passed along as a specially fine man will; but no one suspected that he was an Englishman—his perfect knowledge of French, his appearance, and dress would have passed him as a Frenchman anywhere. It was fortunate, for such was the temper of the gay capital at that time that had Marcion's nationality been discovered he would probably have been mobbed.

He called at the Embassy, and sent in his card, but he had to wait for the Ambassador's summons to the reception-room for more than an hour, as the great man was engaged in very important business, which could not be interrupted. Marcion chafed at the inevitable delay. He knew that every moment lost was invaluable. Besides, he had promised Dulcima that he would not be long. Here again the second chord of his thoughts kept obtruding itself.

The Ambassador, whom Dacres knew slightly from his previous visits to Paris, received him cordially. Sir Gervais Montrose, tall, well-groomed, and courtly, with an intellectual look, which was increased by more than a tendency towards baldness, bore evident traces of anxiety. He was looking much older than when Marcion saw him last, about eighteen months ago. There are few more anxious positions than that of an ambassador at a foreign court when relationships with his own country are strained, and when war may be averted or precipitated at any moment by even his simplest action.

Dacres went straight to the point about the object of his visit. The cloud on Montrose's face deepened when his visitor related the determined effort, unfortunately crowned with success, which had been made to obtain papers so inestimable in value to both countries. The name of Boisdeffre was clearly unknown to him, but at the mention of Crévy, the Ambassador started.

"The affair," he said, "must have been of the highest importance if Monsieur Crévy thought it advisable to go himself."

"You know him, then, this Monsieur Crévy?"

The Ambassador rose from his chair, walked to the window, and looked out; then went to

the door and saw that it was securely fastened. He even turned the key in the lock. When he came back Montrose drew his chair close to that of his visitor.

"Every word I say is in the strictest confidence, and must on no account be repeated to any one in the world without my consent."

"You may trust me absolutely, Ambassador," replied Marcion, regarding Montrose gravely.

"Crévy is at this moment the most powerful man in Paris—which means France—and the most dangerous."

"How about Didot?"

The ghost of a smile flickered about the Ambassador's clear-cut mouth.

"Ah!" he said; "Président Didot! I had forgotten him." He passed his hand across his mouth as a man would who had a moustache, only that Sir Gervais was clean shaven. Then he went on—

"Président Didot is an honest man, sometimes a little mistaken, as at present, for instance, in thinking that his best policy is to put himself at the head of the anti-British feeling, which is, after all, only the froth of the city. If Crévy were out of the way, Didot could be brought to see reason. As it is——!"

"Has Crévy any special position?"

"No, he is everything and nothing—the

invisible mainspring working the watch. Didot fears him, hates him, obeys him. He is accused of every crime, convicted of none. He has spies all over Paris, doubtless in this household. If he could be brought to justice Paris would breathe freely once more, and Président Didot might be guided into a reasonable path. At present he is afraid of losing his own popularity, and, more than all, afraid of Crévy."

"I shall have to tackle this man; I must have those papers."

"You do not value your life?"

"As much as most men; but I value my honour and those papers more."

The Ambassador sat silent in deep thought for several minutes. Then he looked at Marcion and said—

"I am not exaggerating when I say that to go to Crévy's house, which is in the Rue de Varennes, and demand those papers, would be at once futile and dangerous. He would deny their existence, repudiate all knowledge of them, and if he thought you sufficiently in the way, have you murdered afterwards. I know—*know*, mind you, neither imagine nor think—that men who have ventured to cross the path of this man have disappeared. As for this Boisdeffre, of whom you spoke, what has

happened to him? Do you think for a moment he wrested those papers back again from Crévy? He is either a dead man by now or converted into one of Crévy's tools."

The tone of the Ambassador impressed Dacres even more than the words. Sir Gervais went on—

"I will try and find out what I can—from Didot. Crévy could do little with those papers by himself; he must work through the Président. In the meantime watch, take the utmost care of yourself, suspect a knife or a pistol-shot when the night grows dark, and see that no one tampers with your food."

"Why, you make out this man a devil incarnate."

"You are an Englishman, and I suppose I am the only one of that race who knows of the Ten. The TEN rule Paris with a rod of iron. God help the poor wretch who falls beneath their ban. Of the terrible Ten, Crévy is the brain, the soul. If he has thought it well to go himself for those papers, then the worst may be expected. For every act of his has a purpose."

CHAPTER XVI

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

BOISDEFFRE had subsided into his chair limp and beaten, a cowed man. It was a condition which specially appealed to Crévy—in his victims. He would egg them on with a view to reducing them subsequently to this desirable goal. How Boisdeffre hated him—those steel grey eyes and cruel sarcastic lips.

"Now, Monsieur Lecomte, or Boisdeffre, or whatever you choose to call yourself, we can have a little talk without further interruptions. No doubt, with your excellent memory, you can carry your mind back easily to a period of five years ago, or thereabouts. You were in Marseilles, were you not, about that time?"

"I believe so," assented Felix sullenly. His face was red, his voice thick.

"If there is any doubt, you can refresh your memory from that paper;" Crévy indicated by a gesture the document he had handed to him.

"There was a rich Jew money-lender at Marseilles to whom you had gone on several occasions, with the result that you owed him a considerable sum of money, which you found it inconvenient to pay. It is a condition," continued Crévy dispassionately, "in which gentlemen have frequently found themselves."

Boisdeffre did not reply, but sat moodily gazing at the inkstand on the table. Crévy went on—

"It occurred to you that there was a pleasanter way out of the difficulty than meeting these demands which were beginning to get unpleasantly pressing. You had an acquaintance, a friend, a certain Mademoiselle Dubois I believe she was called. She has risen in rank since, and is a trusted representative, shall we say? of more than one Government, and is now called Princess Dolgorouki.

At the mention of the name Boisdeffre stirred for the first time, and looked uneasily at his interrogator. Was there anything this man did not know?

"Mademoiselle Dubois was a very beautiful girl, and this Jew money-lender—I forget his name!"

"Diaz," replied Felix thickly.

"This Diaz met the girl more than once, and proposed to make her his wife."

Boisdeffre clenched his fist. The one passion of his life had been given to Stéphanie.

"Naturally, this did not please you, although financially it would have been a grand match for a small shopkeeper's daughter. Anyway, you determined to prevent it, to get rid of a hated rival, and to extinguish an exorbitant creditor at the same time. A message was sent to Monsieur Diaz, asking him to meet Mademoiselle Dubois at a certain place. It was a dark night in October. It is immaterial whether the lady was a partner in the affair or not, whether she actually wrote the note, which, by the by, I have by me somewhere——"

Boisdeffre started with surprise.

"I always take care to possess and to keep those little documents. They frequently come in useful afterwards. Anyway Diaz went. You met him. The result was that he was put into a sack with a heavy weight to enable him to sink comfortably, and you were prepared to drop him into the sea. Just at the critical moment three men came up, and you found yourself outnumbered. You dropped the sack and struggled a little, but it was not the slightest use, any more than it was just now in this room. In the end your hands were tied behind your back. You ought, of course, to

have been handed over to the police, but other counsels prevailed. It occurred to your captors that you might at some time or other prove useful to them—a strong man like yourself, who does not stick at a trifle. That was the way you were regarded. They agreed to give you your life and your freedom on three conditions, which I had the honour to suggest.”

Felix now remembered that it was at that time he had heard the voice which he had subsequently recognised when Crévy spoke to him. He cursed his own folly for not having located it before.

“You agreed to those conditions, not perhaps very willingly, but the alternative was the police. Two of them you have kept—up to a certain point.”

Felix looked interrogatively at Crévy.

“Perhaps you have forgotten their exact nature. If so, I have them here.”

Again Crévy went to the same drawer from which he had extracted the *précis* he had previously handed to Boisdeffre. After a short search he selected two papers.

“I have here,” he said, “the letter purporting to be written by Mademoiselle Dubois, and the paper you signed by my direction, although not in my presence—in that of my subordinates. These are the conditions :—

“‘I, Alphonse Lecomte, do swear—

“‘First, that I will renounce for ever all claims I may have on Stéphanie Dubois.

“‘Second, I confess to the crime of having murdered the Jew Diaz, to whom I owed large sums of money, in an alley near the quay at Marseilles.

“‘Third, that in return for my life and liberty I will render to the possessor of this paper any service whatsoever at any future time which he may call upon me to perform.’

“It was signed ‘Alphonse Lecomte.’ That is your signature, I presume?”

Crévy handed the document across the table. Boisdeffre took it up and studied it, but only mechanically. The paper carried him back to all that he passed through that eventful night: the slow waiting for the Jew, his thick stifled cry—he could hear it now—the arduous task of stuffing the body into a sack only just big enough to hold it, then the surprise, his fear of death, and subsequent signing away of everything which he cared for in the presence of two out of the three men in a stuffy, evil-looking cabaret. He could smell now the mixed odour of escaped gas and stale tobacco which pervaded the apartment. Felix had never seen the men since. Gradually the compact he had entered into had faded out of

his memory. The men who had figured in this lurid scene had disappeared when the document was signed, taking it away. He had never seen them again. What wonder that with the lapse of years he had come to regard the whole transaction as an ugly dream to be banished as far as it was possible from his memory? He had risen considerably in the world since that night five years ago at Marseilles—by shady enough methods, it is true, but still he had risen. In London he met Stéphanie again, now at the height of fashion, the widow of a Russian duke, whom his Government had allowed to give her his name, instead of sending him to Siberia for some political offence he had committed. Seeing Stéphanie again had stirred afresh fires in his nature never wholly quenched. He had regarded the compact of Marseilles as so much waste paper. Stéphanie, half in fear, half yielding passion to passion, had allowed herself to be drawn into a promise, provided the dot was big enough to free her from her political entanglements, that she would become his wife.

Did Crévy know of this renewal of an old relationship on somewhat different lines? Felix looked at his persecutor with eyes that asked the question. But there was no answer in that

impenetrable mask. Boisdeffre thought of his hundred thousand livres. They seemed far enough to seek now.

He was recalled to himself by Crévy's voice.

"The third condition still awaits fulfilment. As you see, we have never lost sight of you, but hitherto we have not seen it necessary to make use of your services. Now, however, the time is come when you may be called upon to fulfil the third part of your compact."

"I should like to know for whom I may be called upon to work?" said Felix as sullenly as he dared.

Crévy leant across the table, and looked at Boisdeffre as if to mark the effect of his words.

"There is a small community which works for the good of France."

"Yes?"

"It is called the Ten."

Felix started.

"You have heard of them?"

Who in the shady walks of French politics has not, that terrible modern graft of the noisome fruit of past centuries?

"It is to the Ten to whom you have promised allegiance. Beware that you fail not to obey, even though the task exacted of you were the execution of the Président himself, for disobedience is death."

The fearful tones with which these words were said are indescribable.

"The Ten meet to-night at eleven o'clock at the fourth house on the left of the Rue d'Orsay, which appears to be unoccupied. At midnight walk slowly down the street, and, if there are any commands for you, some one will slap you on the left shoulder and say the word 'Seine.' His commands must be obeyed instantly and to the letter. If no one comes to you by the time the clock in the church at the corner of the Rue d'Orsay strikes one, you can go home. There is nothing for you at present."

Boisdeffre understood that he was dismissed. Crévy said to him a last word or two.

"Mind, if you execute any commission for us, you will be generously rewarded according to the task entrusted to you; it may be, if the work is a great one and the danger considerable, as much as you would have got if you had succeeded in carrying off the papers for which you went to England. If you wilfully fail, or dare to betray us, there is no country in the world can shelter you from our vengeance."

Crévy touched the bell; and a tall footman in black showed Boisdeffre, still in a dazed state, to the door. The last thing his eyes rested upon in the room was the red ink of the paper which contained the story of his own life.

CHAPTER XVII

CROSS PURPOSES

BOISDEFFRE left the Rue de Varennes faint from long fasting, utterly weary, afraid with that vague fear of the unknown which is the worst of all. It was not only the shadow of disappointment and of what had happened, which was upon him; but the presage of coming danger.

Fatigue, absolute physical fatigue, proved the dominant factor. He had a hasty meal, a glass of absinthe, and then lay down on a sofa and went to sleep. It was nearly six o'clock when he woke—time to meet the Princess Dolgorouki at the station. Before starting Boisdeffre altered his appearance and dress as much as possible. He did not wish to attract the attention of any of Crévy's spies to the fact of his renewed connection with Stéphanie. A telegram had awaited him on his return from the interview with Crévy, announcing the train

by which the Princess was to arrive in accordance with his own request.

Punctually to the minute the train steamed in, and the Princess alighted. She was the cynosure of all eyes, her great beauty and strikingly rich dress singling her out even in Paris. Stéphanie was unmoved by the silent homage of the crowd. She was too accustomed to it.

They drove to an hotel, where the Princess at once secured the best rooms that were vacant and then ordered dinner for two in her private sitting-room. In spite of her title Stéphanie retained to the full her bourgeois appetite, and not a few of the tastes in food and drink she had acquired in very different circumstances at Marseilles. Before Boisdeffre she was not afraid of displaying her proclivities. He knew her too well to be influenced either way.

Felix drank deeply, mixing his drinks, which was unwise, and ate but little. He was gloomy and depressed. As soon as the dessert was on the table, and they were alone, he poured out the story of his experiences.

Stéphanie watched him quietly during the narration, displaying neither surprise nor disappointment. In truth she felt neither. She was just weighing it all as it affected herself quite dispassionately. That he suffered was

not of the slightest consequence. It is curious how dense we are sometimes, how blindly unconscious of the point of view adopted by our human environment. Boisdeffre was perfectly assured beforehand and at the time of Stéphanie's sympathy. She would feel as he did, for him, with him. She did nothing of the kind. She was merely calculating the chances as they affected herself, how was she going to come out on top? It was clear that Felix was the fly in the spider's web, of which Crévy was the spider, one who was not at all likely to let anything escape out of his clutches. The Princess knew Crévy well, had known him for years.

"It is very unfortunate," said Stéphanie, seeing that speech was expected of her. "You will have to do what you have promised, of course."

All the liquor Boisdeffre had taken was mounting to his head. It stimulated his courage, and at the same time inflamed his passion for the Princess, who had changed before dinner into a low evening dress of black silk trimmed with old gold satin ribbons, displaying her lovely bust and gleaming white shoulders.

"How can I do what he wants me? How can I give you up? I would rather die first."

Stéphanie regarded this as a form of speech. He had already exposed its extravagance by preferring to give her up rather than accept the alternative. What he had done at Marseilles he would do again at Paris.

"There is no alternative," she said, fingering a ruby wine-glass absently.

"Yes, there is. Crévy hinted to me of a plot to kill the Président. I will go and warn him, and tell him of the meeting-place of the Ten, and of the time. They will be captured by the police and imprisoned. I shall get a big reward, and once Crévy is out of the way, shall recover my papers, and secure the hundred thousand livres—and you, Stéphanie."

Boisdeffre came near to her, drinking in her lovely form with his eyes, his hot breath reeking with the fumes of wine fanning her cheek. The strain of what he had passed through had told upon him. His face was coarse and red. The Princess wondered how she could ever have thought him good-looking, been attracted by him.

Felix put his arms round her and kissed her lips. She compelled herself not to show the revulsion she felt. Her self-control had been the making of her all through her life, otherwise she had not mounted to the giddy heights to which she had attained. Self-control and

selfishness. She had them both to an inordinate degree. They had proved passports to wealth, rank, and position.

"You do love me a little?" he said.

"Don't be silly," she replied. She patted him on the cheek.

Boisdeffre was satisfied. He could not read what was at the back of those luminous eyes, or he would have struck her on the face.

"What a joy it will be to have you always! Wholly mine! I have lived for it for years. Now it is near; has come. Then to see Crévy in the toils."

Felix swore a great oath, not loud but deep. The insults of that day had sunk like iron into his soul. Yes, it was worth risking a little to checkmate Crévy, grow rich at a blow, and gain Stéphanie as his own.

The Princess said not a word to advise him to alter his decision. She apparently acquiesced in it all.

"You are crushing my dress. You do not know what it cost," she pushed him away half-playfully, yet with the force which lay in those shapely arms.

"What does it matter what it cost, Stéphanie? I will give you another."

"I am content with this," she laughed, "provided you don't spoil it."

Then she rang for the servants to clear the table, and so create a diversion. While they were in the room, Boisdeffre had perforce to be quiet, and the Princess did a good deal of thinking. Her own position was a precarious one. The accession of Président Didot to power had brought about a lukewarmness with Russia. She depended upon the Franco-Russian alliance for a large part of her income. Even Didot himself had more than hinted that he might possibly dispense with her services. She had a considerable nest-egg laid up against rainy weather; but not nearly sufficient to compensate her for what she would lose. Of all the public men of the day, Crévy had stood most consistently her friend since he had first found her at Marseilles, and estimated the political value of her rare beauty and unscrupulous nature. If Crévy were out of the way, Didot would speedily find another outlet for the money which had been so lavishly poured into her lap of late years. Crévy, on the other hand, was likely to remain her friend for reasons other than political. On the whole she decided that when Boisdeffre was plotting the ruin of Crévy, which she was perfectly certain was beyond his skill and power to accomplish, he was acting directly contrary to her interests.

"I should like to buy your thoughts," said

Boisdeffre, noticing her abstraction when they were once more alone.

"I expect you know them already," she laughed.

Felix laughed too. Then he rose to go—very reluctantly.

"Well, I must be off if I would see the Président, or perhaps better still the Chief of Police."

"Yes, you will have to be quick," she said. "Did you not say they met at eleven?"

"Yes, the fourth house from the end of the street on the left-hand side of the Rue d'Orsay."

The Princess nodded.

"Good luck go with you."

She thought, "I shall never see you again."

"I will go and put my cloak on lest I should be recognised—besides, the nights get chilly towards midnight."

"Then you intend to fulfil Monsieur Crévy's instructions as well? To go yourself to the Rue d'Orsay."

"Oh, yes! I mean to be there to see Crévy taken. It is my turn now. I would not lose the enjoyment of the scene for a king's ransom."

Stéphanie laughed at his folly. She knew now what she wanted to know.

Felix left the room, and returned in about ten minutes. He was cloaked nearly from his

head to his heels. In his hand he carried a soft, black felt hat.

From the street outside there came the sound of voices, men angrily discussing the topics of the day with interspersed exclamations, "À bas les Anglais!" "Vive la République!" "Vive Président Didot!" The evening papers had come out with some fresh denunciations of perfidious Albion.

"There will be war," exclaimed Boisdeffre eagerly, his eyes sparkling. "Those papers will be worth their weight in thousand-pound notes. I shall keep them back, and not part with them immediately. They will fetch an even higher price. We shall be immensely rich, Stéphanie, you and I."

Verily, the unrest, the excitement, and the wine combined, must have turned his head.

"You have not got them yet," she said with a sneer, which was so subtle that Boisdeffre failed to recognise it.

"No, but I shall have when Crévy is taken. I know where they are. He had them put away before me. Fool! Fool! He despised me. Ah! he did not know Felix Boisdeffre."

"You had better go," she said again. "It is getting late."

"Yes, yes, you are right. I must be off."

He came and kissed her on her shoulders,

first one and then the other. Her flesh instinctively shuddered under his touch. Something said to her, "It is the kiss of a dead man, who has been your lover."

"Why do you shudder?" he asked, surprised.

"I do not know. You said the nights were chilly."

"Not in here, surely?"

"Then it must be myself."

"Won't you kiss me?" he said.

She rose up, and again pushed Boisdeffre away with her hands.

"Not now, a kiss rewards success. Wait till you have succeeded."

"Then I shall expect a thousand."

"You may have as many as you like—when you have succeeded."

"And none now?" he lurched towards her.

"No, none now," and, avoiding him, Stéphanie slipped out of the room.

She too went to throw a heavy cloak over her evening dress, and put on her walking shoes.

Boisdeffre, finding she did not return, went heavily down the stairs. With her door open, the Princess could hear each footfall. At the bottom step but one, he miscalculated, and swore as he caught at the banister to save himself from falling.

Was it an omen?

Stéphanie allowed Felix ten minutes. Then she followed him down the stairs and out into the brilliantly-lighted street.

She called a cab, and gave the driver a direction in a low voice, just loud enough to reach his ears.

The Princess Dolgorouki was on her way to call on Monsieur Crévy.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT DULCIMA HEARD THROUGH THE WALL

DULCIMA had gone to her room to rest as she had been bidden. Hers was a wild nature which had always resented and rebelled at discipline. Yet she was ready now to render obedience. It is one of the paradoxes of the feminine nature, that the most lawless will take law willingly from some people. They kiss the rod when it is handled in a certain grip. The girl took off her boy's dress, and put on certain feminine habiliments, and a dressing-gown, and then lay down to rest. Tired as she was, or perhaps because she was over-tired, Dulcima could not sleep for a while. She could hardly believe that she was the same girl who had been at once the terror and the pet of the convent school. Ages seemed to divide that time from this; yet it was really only a few days ago that she had left it all. She turned back over the closed

chapter with its joys and sorrows, its laughter and its tears. They all seemed so unreal now. She had only begun to live after she had come to the Moyle, nay, later still, after she had met the Moyle's master. Every incident of that subsequent time, every thought, every feeling, came back to her now that she had time and opportunity to rehearse it all. Her large eyes gazed at the wall-paper of the room, and the tired lines imparted a pathetic look to her face. The possibilities of life loomed large before her. For the first time in her life, Dulcima was facing the burden of an unknown future. The depths of her nature were touched; and she was afraid of the revelation which had come to her. Her guardian was just the man to inspire her budding tenderness, strong, physically and intellectually, handsome, of fine ideals. Dulcima had come intending to conquer, and had herself been conquered. She had surrendered without a formal summons to her own nature and to him.

Gradually her thoughts faded, became blurred, indistinct. She slept. Some hours passed while her bosom rose and fell in regular inspiration. The rest she needed had come to her. Before she was quite awake, she was conscious of voices muffled and indistinct. Dulcima's bedroom at the hotel had formerly

opened out into a dressing-room. Subsequently the latter had been converted into a separate bedroom. The door had been left, fastened up, and then papered over. No one would have suspected that there had once been communication except by discovering that every sound penetrated from one apartment to the other, the door affording nothing approaching to a non-conductor of sound, which an ordinary wall would have done. Dulcima sat up in bed; at first she thought some one was speaking to her, and very nearly called out in response. Then it dawned upon her that the speakers were in the next room.

"He will return from the fête between 6 and 7 p.m., according to the official programme, and will pass through the Rue de Ville about half-past six. In the Rue the procession will be stopped by an accident to a fiacre. That is your opportunity. You will be in one of the upper rooms of the house which has been pointed out to you, whose owner is in the country with his family. You are a dead shot. Take good aim; and the result should not be doubtful. After you have fired, there will be confusion, and if you keep well in the background, no one should know at any rate for a few minutes whence the shot has come. Get out at the back and make

your way to Grenelle Station as quickly as possible. The rest is easy."

"I will follow the instructions exactly, and have no doubt as to the result."

Dulcima almost fancied she was dreaming, especially as she heard no more, one or both of the men having apparently left the adjoining apartment immediately after the above directions had been given and received. But the words were clear and distinct enough and could admit of but one interpretation. Some one was to be at a fête—neither person nor day had been specified as they were clearly known to the recipient of the other instructions—on his way back traffic was to be interrupted, and the unknown was to be shot from one of the upper windows of an adjoining house to the place where the stoppage took place. Dulcima, palpitating, excited, jumped up, and in doing so, knocked off her shoes which were on the bed. They fell with a clatter on to the floor, a sound which, of course, could be as distinctly heard in the adjoining apartment as the voices of the speakers could in hers. Dulcima did not think of this. All her thoughts were taken up with the necessity of finding Marcion directly, and telling him what she had heard with a view to averting the catastrophe. The girl knew perfectly that

such a thing was well within the bounds of possibility. Assassination was in the air. The forces of Anarchy were abroad and were making themselves felt in all directions. Providence had imparted to her a secret which meant life or death to some one, probably very highly placed. With nervous fingers, she removed the comparative undress in which she had been lying down and put on her boy's clothes in the place of it. Her toilet was a hurried one, for she fully expected to find Dacres downstairs, as he ought to have returned to the hotel long before this. He would see the police, and avert the threatened blow. She said again and again to herself the name "the Rue de Ville," lest she should forget it, as it was the one definite piece of information she had.

Dulcima turned the handle of the door with tremulous fingers, threw it open and found herself confronted by a strange man. She uttered a little startled "Ah!" at the sudden apparition. Then a shawl was flung over her face, and drawn tightly over her mouth, so as to stop her breath and entirely stifle her voice. Strong arms picked her up and she felt herself being carried rapidly along. She kicked and struggled with all her might; but the power about her did not relax its grip. It was far

too strong to yield to her weak powers of resistance. An awful sense of suffocation came over her. She was dying one of the most awful deaths. The air sang and whistled through her throbbing brain. In that brief moment the thought of Marcion absorbed her. She loved him, ah, now she knew that she should never see him again. Then the thought passed with her into oblivion.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

THERE are few things that a strong and naturally resolute man hates more than irresolution, to want a thing very badly, and not to know what is the right thing to do in order to get it. Marcion Dacres left the Ambassador in this uncomfortable frame of mind. He recognised the truth of the latter's reasoning. It was idle to go and ask Crévy for the papers, for he had no proof that he had them. The possession of a portmanteau was not exactly conclusive of the theft. That it was dangerous to make an enemy of Crévy, possessed of immense power, and absolutely unscrupulous as to the use of it, did not enter into Dacres' calculations to any great extent. He was constitutionally brave, and he underestimated alike the enemy and the danger, as is the way of his race. In his irresolution, Marcion directed his steps towards the

Elysée. He could not have told why, unless it was that Sir Gervais Montrose had said that Crévy would have to work through Président Didot, and that consequently the Elysée would be the ultimate destination of the papers.

When Marcion came sufficiently near to the door, he saw some one just going in, about the size and build of Crévy with a roll of papers under his arms. He could not be sure of the man's identity, having only seen him for that moment on the railway, neither of course could he swear to the bundle of documents, except that they were about the bulk of those which Boissedeffre had stolen from him at the Moyle. He sprang forward eagerly; but the door was shut long before he could reach even the police who guarded the entrance. Marcion went past at a brisk trot like a man in a hurry. He knew it was useless to try and see the Président without an appointment; and if he had run to the door of the Elysée and then stopped dead, the police would have interrogated him, and possibly, if his answers were not satisfactory, taken him up on suspicion. After traversing a couple of streets, Dacres entered a *café*, and sat down at a small table, remote from the door. He ordered a cup of black coffee, and when he was served, sat moodily sipping it. His thoughts were of

the same hue as the coffee. He believed himself utterly defeated. The papers, which represented a life's work, and which were of infinite value to his country, had been stolen from him just at the moment when they were most precious to him, because they were just completed. He had seemed twice,—once on board the *Léopard*, once in the train when Boisdeffre was his ostensible ally,—on the eve of recovering them. Now in the Président's house, if he was right in his surmise as to the identity of Crévy, they were further away from him than ever. He was utterly defeated. Marcion passed his hand through his hair, a habit of his when perplexed.

There were very few people in the *café*. One was a priest, but of more distinguished appearance than the majority of his brethren. Any one addressing him, would have instinctively accorded him the title of Monseigneur. Yet his garb did not differ, except perhaps in quality, from that of the poorest *curé* in Paris. When the priest saw Dacres enter, he started, and followed him with his eyes afterwards. When Marcion thrust his hand through the locks of hair, which roofed his high forehead, the priest smiled, rose up and crossed the room to the table at which the Englishman was sitting,

carrying his cup in his hand. The priest set his cup down, took a chair, turned its back towards Dacres, and sat down across it, his strong and rather fat chin resting on the top rail of the chair back. His eyes twinkled.

"I believe you have forgotten me, Monsieur Dacres. It is easy to forget when you have saved a man's life; but difficult when the positions are reversed."

"You had your back to the light, Father Moerin, so I may be excused if I failed to recognise you for a moment."

Marcion held out his hand and the priest took it warmly. His was a genuine and obvious pleasure. To Dacres it would have been under different circumstances. He was too overwhelmed by his troubles to be pleased to see any one.

'When I have bad dreams—which is not often, although I am now the keeper of the Président's conscience and have to attend many official dinners which bore me—I see again always that night when you dragged me and my servant out of our sinking boat. I hear the rush and suck, suck of the waves, greedy to devour us. Then I see you, my friend, riding on the storm to our succour, and risking your own life for ours. I remember your kindness in my waking thoughts

when the dream is passed, as did the reality all those days on your yacht. I pray for you amongst the benefactors of my life. So it keeps your memory green; and when I saw you just now pass your hand through your hair, I said to myself, It is Monsieur Dacres, whom I have never seen to thank again since that day four years ago, when you bid me goodbye at Calais."

"At that time, Father Moerin, if I remember rightly, you were working among the seamen of your coast, and it was when employed on the best of errands that you met with the storm which destroyed your boat and nearly proved fatal to yourself."

"That is so," said the priest gravely. "Lately I have been sent to quite other work in Paris by the will of the good God, and of my superiors. I preach to fashionable crowds at Notre Dame, and at the Madeleine, and keep the conscience of Monsieur Didot as I did of his predecessor; but my heart is with the fishermen and sailors, their wives and children between Calais and Dieppe, where I worked fifteen years."

The mention of Didot's name set Dacres' nerves jangling afresh. He was brought back to the mental topic from which he had been temporarily diverted by the meeting with the priest.

Father Moerin, accustomed to reading faces, saw his friend's sadness and abstraction.

"Why are you sad in this gay city, Monsieur Dacres? I thought no Englishman, or American, for that matter, came to Paris, except when all was well with him, and he wanted to be amused to the top of his bent."

"Mine is a very different errand," replied Marcion bitterly. "I suppose I am the exception which, according to our English proverb, proves the rule."

They were as much alone in that far corner of the *café* as if they had been on a desert island, as far as interruption or eavesdropping was concerned.

"Tell me," he said, "what is on your mind. You know you can trust me, and whatever you say to me shall be as sacred as if uttered in the sanctuary of the confessional."

The priest carried the proof of his own conspicuous honesty and truthfulness in his trusty brown eyes.

"I have come here in quest of some papers of which I was robbed by a compatriot of yours in my own house in England. He knocked me on the head, taking me unawares, and when I was rendered insensible, stole my papers."

The priest's mouth had grown stern and set.

"His name?" he said tersely.

"Boisdeffre."

The priest said the name over to himself, either considering it or impressing it on his memory.

"He is unknown to me. Those papers? They were of great value? Money?"

"I have of late been in the service of the British Government. I have studied our coasts, and had been entrusted with the duty of drawing up a somewhat elaborate scheme for the defence of strategical points. To indicate the changes I considered necessary, I had to set down what was already in place—every gun, submarine mine, masked battery, the distance the guns would carry, even the system of secret signalling, all were there."

"Was it not dangerous"—the priest meant foolish—"to risk all these papers in a private house, unprotected?"

"Yes, it was utter folly. But I did not know that the presence of these papers at my house was suspected, and the Moyle where I live is so lonely, the thought of a robber of any kind, much less a political robber, never entered my head. Of course, I locked the documents up securely enough when I was away from home, or not actually at work upon them. Boisdeffre came upon me when I was busy putting the finishing touches to them."

"You were betrayed, probably?"

"Yes," replied Dacres bitterly. "I believe I was, as man ever has been from the days of Adam downwards."

"By a woman? What was her name?"

"The Princess Dolgorouki. In my folly and trust in her I had told her where the papers were. The attack upon me followed immediately after. Besides, I have other reasons for thinking so." Marcion was referring to the shadows he had seen on the blind of the house in Park Lane.

"I have heard of her," said the priest. "She is one of the cat's paws of the world, and will probably one day get singed. I should have thought you too wise, my friend, to confide in a woman who lives by her wits. The world of politics is her market, and information is its current coin. To know is to be rich."

"She has a fine house, and the social world seems to be at her feet."

"Fine clothes, fine house, fine carriages and horses are the scenery of the acts in which she takes the chief *rôle*."

"I know little of women," Marcion admitted. He was about to add, "and care less," but a thought of Dulcima stopped him. Flippant, wild, a hoyden she might be, but with it all true as steel most certainly.

"I have to study them," said Moerin. "They come to me for vivisection. They speak. I listen and think."

"Anyway," Marcion continued, "I was robbed; and in my yacht went in pursuit of the robber; that brings me here."

"You have not found him, or recovered the documents? That goes without saying."

"Curiously enough, this miscreant, Boisdeffre, was himself victimised. A man named Crévy was passing as steward of the vessel, and abstracted the papers. It was he who brought them to Paris."

At the mention of Crévy, the priest uttered a low ejaculation and instantly cast a searching glance into every corner of the *café*. He drew his chair a little nearer to Marcion, so that their faces nearly touched.

"Do you think that is solid wall behind you?" he asked, apparently irreverently.

"Yes, I should say so," said Dacres, wondering at the question.

"Solid walls and a wide space round you are wanted when you speak of Jean Crévy."

"You talk like the British Ambassador, with whom I had an interview an hour or so ago."

"Sir Gervais Montrose is a man with his eyes open, and a brain at the back of them. Besides he knows his Paris."

There was a pause of a few minutes. Dacres chafed at the impression Crévy evidently made on two such widely different men as the British Ambassador and Father Moerin.

"One would think we were all children," he said, "to be frightened by a bugbear."

"A bad man in a position of great power, unscrupulous, crafty, is a bugbear. I have known Jean Crévy for some years, intimately only since I have been located here. I have never known him fail in anything he undertook. His system of espionage is infinitely more complete than that of the police. He works like a mole underground; but the results are anything but mole-hills. To cross him is to provoke——," he broke off; "I ought not to say it, for I am always crossing him. There are only two people who have influence with Président Didot at all commensurate with that of Crévy; they are myself and Madame Didot. She is a remarkable woman, beautiful, able, and against Crévy, because she is jealous of his power over her husband. I am against Crévy, but for quite a different reason."

The priest stopped. He had said more than he intended.

"Yes," said Marcion, "I understand. You hate what Crévy represents, because——"

Dacres nodded. It was not his way to put what sounded like flattery into words, neither would Moerin have liked it. The priest was a good man. That was the gist of it. Crévy was not. Their antagonism was primal, inevitable. Moerin went on after a few seconds—

"This very affair of the papers is a case in point. Crévy is bent on war with England; why, I do not as yet quite understand. His going himself to secure these documents—and he would have got them from you, or from Boisdeffre, or from any one else in the world, if he had made up his mind to have them, be sure of that—shows the vast importance they are as parts of a larger scheme. He has persuaded the Président that his own power and position can only be assured by his putting himself at the head of the Anglophobe mania, which has got hold of the feather-brains of France. But during the time that he has been absent, Madame Didot and I have been working in the opposite sense. We have pointed out to the Président that, although success would probably attend our efforts at the beginning of the struggle—the actual invasion of England is far easier, believe me, than you Englishmen think."

Marcion nodded. "I *know* it," he said quietly.

"I forgot you have studied," Moerin said apologetically. "Speaking of your nation generally, I may say without offence that your self-confidence is at once your danger and your salvation—your danger when a fight begins, your salvation before it is over. But to continue. We have succeeded in convincing the Président that in the end, when the whole might of the British Empire was roused and themselves stung to the quick by the horrors of an invasion—it is horrible everywhere, but most of all in a thickly populated country like——"

A man had come and sat down just behind them. The priest rose; "If you have finished your coffee," he said, "we will go for a little walk."

CHAPTER XX

THE MYSTERY OF THE HOTEL SERVATI

MARCION did not require to be told what the priest thought. He was beginning to understand the way in which the gay capital was honeycombed with suspicion. Yet once out in the bright sunshine of the streets and boulevards, it seemed incredible. They walked arm in arm for a distance of about a quarter of a mile. Father Moerin had not as yet reverted to the topic of their conversation in the *café*. Suddenly he said—

“He is still following us.”

Dacres was amazed, for the priest had not looked round apparently.

“What, the man who came near to us at the *café*? Are you sure?”

“Quite. Now let me ask you one thing. Does Crévy know you have followed him to Paris? Does he know you by sight? I did

not gather from what you told me that you two had personally collided in this affair."

"I believe I can say no to both your questions—unless he has found out that I am here from Boisdeffre."

Marcion had told the priest the whole story, including the incident of the railway carriage, but without mentioning his companion. He felt sure that the priest would be shocked at the idea of Dulcima's masquerading in boy's clothes, and that, not knowing the girl, he would judge it in a very different way than if he did.

"Then this man is following us because you have been seen with me, and are strange to him. He will try and find out where you live. I think we can baffle him in that."

So saying, Father Moerin went up to a large house with a stately portico, and a flight of marble steps. He knocked, and a man-servant—to whom the priest was evidently well known—opened the door after a little delay. Standing sideways gave Dacres an opportunity of looking up the boulevard the way they had come. He saw then that the priest was right in his conclusion. The man of the *café* was loitering along in an apparently unconcerned manner.

"I know your mistress is out," said the

priest, "but I want to show my friend one or two of the pictures I always so much admire. You can tell Madame Gelozzi that I have taken the liberty." The man bowed, and led the way to a fine picture gallery, which was at the back of the mansion looking out on a garden.

"Do not wait," said Father Moerin; "we can let ourselves out through the garden entrance."

The man bowed again respectfully, and withdrew.

"Madame will be pleased," he said.

Father Moerin motioned his friend to an ottoman, and then came and sat down beside him.

"We can talk unreservedly here, and when we go out, our importunate friend will not find us."

The man-servant came in, and asked if he should serve tea, an offer which was declined.

"I was about to have said, when we were interrupted, that I think we have convinced the Président that, in spite of the great efforts the French nation has made during the past year or two, and especially during the last ten or twelve months, the probabilities of a prolonged conflict with your nation and its dependencies are all in favour of another Sedan. Most of us

are old enough to remember the confidence and elation which attended the commencement of the campaign of '70, the awful feeling in the capital when the news of reverses came in, and above all, the execration which was heaped upon the Government. If Napoleon the Third, who had, at any rate, done something for France, and had a quasi-hereditary hold on the somewhat transitory regard of the French people"—the priest smiled—"was hounded from the throne, and the Empress had to escape in disguise from Paris, what would be the fate of an upstart like Didot, the creature of yesterday? The *débâcle* of France would assuredly sound the death-knell of Didot by almost universal acclaim."

"You did not put it quite like that to the Président?"

"Not exactly in those words, of course, but the meaning was equally clear. He saw its force, at any rate."

"Since then, as we know, Monsieur Crévy has been with him, and Crévy thinks or wishes to think otherwise."

"I am sorry for Didot," remarked the priest philosophically. "He is like the sea which takes its colour from the clouds overhead."

"Crévy is a war cloud, and by this time has no doubt imparted his hue to the sea,

especially as he is assisted by so valuable a prize as the papers he has stolen from me," suggested Dacres bitterly.

"I will call in at the Elysée when I leave here, and see what can be done in the way of strengthening the Président's saner conclusions. In any case, Crévy will have known before calling on the Président exactly how matters stood, and who had been advising a contrary policy."

"In what way?"

"Crévy is admirably served with intelligence from the Elysée. One of Didot's secretaries, a man named Morrier, is a creature of his. No doubt there are others in a more subordinate capacity."

"If Crévy is the man the Ambassador and you yourself make him out to be, how is it that he does not take an opportunity of ridding himself of so dangerous an adversary as yourself? If my life is in jeopardy when I cross swords with Crévy, how comes it that you go about Paris undisturbed—you who cross swords with him continually?"

The priest smiled.

"I represent a power in Paris against which even Crévy at present does not dare to pitted himself."

"You mean the Church, I presume?"

"The Church is wide and vague, not always quite homogeneous either for attack or defence. There is within it a body which is united, awake, all-permeating, powerful, homogeneous."

Dacres understood. "You mean the Society of Jesus?"

Moerin looked before him at the pictures on the opposite wall. Dacres regarded him with a new interest. A fine figure of a man, muscular yet plump, handsome, dignified. This he had always known him to be; but he was struck now with a subtle something which had escaped his notice before—a sense of power, a consciousness of sovereignty over men.

"I see you in a new light, Father," remarked Marcion frankly.

"It seemed good, why, I know not," said the priest, "to the Head of our Order to invest in me the supreme power of the Society in France. There are people even on the Continent of Europe—and of course in England no one understands—who think the Order effete, played out, of the past." The priest rose and stood before Marcion, who remained sitting, and laid a finger impressively on his shoulder. "The contrary is the truth. There never was a time when the Society was more powerful than it is to-day. Crowned heads may fall. The Président is here to-day, and to-morrow may be in his

coffin—there are forces antagonistic to him even now, and Crévy, if he finds that his influence is waning—as it is—would act without scruple. But the Society will ever remain a power to be reckoned with in every capital of Europe. Of all this, of course, on the honour of an English gentleman, you will say nothing.”

“You may trust me absolutely, of course,” replied Dacres, rising to his feet.

“Now we will go—you to your hotel, I to the Président.”

Marcion told him where he was staying.

“Your host—Servati—is a friend of the Order, *de robe courte*” (lay member), “in fact. If you want anything from him, which is not in the ordinary way of service, mention my name. Stay!” Father Moerin drew a ring off his finger. “If you show this, words will not be necessary. In fact, you may find it serviceable in more ways than one during your stay in Paris. You can return it to me at No. 30, Rue Renier, when you have no further occasion for its use.”

Dacres thanked the priest warmly, and slipped the ring over his finger.

“I will send you a line if I have anything to impart with reference to the papers. My impression is that nothing will be done with them for a day or two. In the afternoon to-

morrow the Président and Madame Didot are to visit in state a *fête* at Clichy, organised on behalf of some local charities ; his mornings are always fully taken up. To-night they dine with the Italian Ambassador. As I understand, even Crévy has hardly had an opportunity as yet to go through the statistics you have got together——”

“Unless he took advantage of the train journey from Havre to Paris.”

“Anyway, Président Didot will be sure to look them through himself. He prides himself on his acquaintance with these subjects.”

The priest and his companion walked through the garden where the sun shone through the tracery of the leaves on the south wall, ripening the peaches and nectarines. It hardly seemed possible that the great heart of the city pulsed so near, or that wars and rumours of wars were in the air, so peaceful and quiet was that shelter.

Father Moerin opened the door in the wall, evidently familiar with its fastenings. Outside they parted. They were in a quiet bye street. At the end of it, Dacres jumped into an electric tram which would take him nearly to the door of his hotel. He was beginning to be anxious because he had left Dulcima so much longer than he had intended. Several hours had

passed, whereas he had promised to return quickly. A few yards of rapid walking brought him to Servati's. He got into the lift and was set down by the attendant at the landing upon which their private sitting-room opened. The hotel was still and silent, neither visitors nor servants being about in the late afternoon until it neared the time of *table d'hôte*. Marcion entered their sitting-room, glancing eagerly round. It was empty. Surely Dulcima, tired as she was, could never have slept on till now? She might have tired of waiting and gone out. He would run up to her bedroom and find out. Dacres did not wait for the lift, but mounted the stairs, two steps at a time. He was even surprised at his own eagerness to see his ward again, a longing quite apart from the fact that they were partners in this affair. Having reached the right door—it was on the other side of the passage from his own—he knocked gently, then more loudly. There was no answer. If his first explanation of her absence from the sitting-room was the correct one, she must be sleeping pretty soundly. After drumming a third time on the panel, he tried the handle, and finding the door unfastened went in. It was the first time Dacres had ever been into a girl's bedroom, and he had a sense of setting foot within a sanctuary. On the bed lay the

feminine drapery and dressing gown Dulcima had used when lying down, and discarded afterwards. Otherwise there was no indication of her. She was certainly not in the room. The drapery gave him a realisation of her. Marcion had a throbbing at his heart he could not account for. The privacy and emptiness of the room seemed to have a message for him, but it was one he could not interpret. Leaving the bedroom, Dacres summoned the lift, and descended to the ground floor. He questioned the *concierge* and porters. They had not seen "the young gentleman" go out.

"Was there another entrance?" Marcion asked the *concierge*.

"Oh, yes, sir, there is a door at the back; it is chiefly used by the tradesmen and servants of the hotel."

"Would any one know if my nephew had gone that way?"

"Possibly not, sir, in the afternoon. Few people use it between midday and six o'clock."

"You have been here ever since I went out?"

"Yes, sir."

There was evidently nothing more to be got out of the *concierge*.

Marcion went to look at the back entrance. It opened upon a narrow alley, just wide

enough for a trap to go up and down. Two carriages could not pass each other in it. There was a direction outside each end indicating that one had to be used as an entrance, the other as an exit. Opening on to the alley were stables and outhouses. Dacres paced the length of it without meeting any one or obtaining the slightest clue as to Dulcima's whereabouts. He returned to his sitting-room downcast and baffled. He could not doubt the *concierge*, who had no reason for deceiving him. On the other hand, it appeared most improbable that Dulcima had stolen out of the hotel by the servants' entrance. He sat down, and buried his face in his hands. A few days ago the world and success had been at his feet. He had hardly a care. Now it was all changed. Dacres probed his own heart, and knew that Dulcima had come to mean a great deal to him. Her father had been his one life-long friend. But it was not as her father's daughter that she filled his thoughts now. Her individuality was her own. He had never before been thrown so intimately into a girl's life. Dulcima had come in, and won her place.

About half an hour passed, and there came a knock at the door. His heart leaped, but of course she would not have knocked. Nevertheless, instead of saying, "come in," he ran to

the door and opened it. Instead of Dulcima it was a note sealed with the letter "M" on the seal. Even now he hoped it might be news of her. Marcion opened the envelope with feverish impatience, and read what was inside with intense disappointment, although at another time it would have afforded satisfaction. The note ran:—

"DEAR FRIEND,—I do not think that D. has altered his opinion. I do not fancy that D. and C. parted on the best of terms. The latter, however, left behind him what you are looking for. No use will be made of them at present, at any rate, not immediately. I shall strive to get them restored to you. If I can be of service in this way, I shall fulfil one of the truest wishes of my life.—M."

It was a further revelation of what Marcion felt for Dulcima that the letter meant no more to him than it did. His first quest had taken a second place to his anxiety at Dulcima's strange disappearance. So much had been made of Crévy's powers and malevolence, that Dacres began, without rhyme or reason, to connect Dulcima's spiriting away with the hand which had conveyed the papers to Paris.

CHAPTER XXI

A MODERN DELILAH

FELIX BOISDEFFRE took elaborate precautions against observation when he went to the Chief of Police in Paris to acquaint him with the secret meeting-place of the Ten. He was quite aware that if Crévy knew of the errand, not only would his purpose be frustrated, but his own death-warrant would be signed. Only the greatness of the stakes for which he was playing would have nerved him to run the risk. For Boisdeffre, in spite of his life of intrigue, had always been singularly careful of his own skin. Little did he guess that at the very moment he was dodging in and out of alleys and byeways, and watching for suspicion on the face of every man he met, the whole affair was simplified by the visit the Princess was paying to Crévy.

Stéphanie met the head of the all-powerful

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Ten on his own doorstep, Crévy having just returned from his interview with the Président in a frame of mind the reverse of amiable. There was no mistaking the Princess, although her presence was quite unexpected, Crévy believing her to be in London. He raised his hat. There is a difference between courtesy and respect: the one is an attitude, the other an impression. Crévy could be brutal when he liked—even to a woman. But he did not prefer it unless it served his ends.

Stéphanie was lovely; more than that, she was *distingué*. These things appeal to the man.

"You were coming to see me?" he asked with some surprise.

"Yes, if you are at liberty?"

"I am always at liberty to you."

Crévy opened the door with a latchkey. A man-servant in the hall came forward, to whom the master of the house handed his hat and stick. Then he gave his arm to the Princess, and conducted her into a small sitting-room on the ground floor. Crévy divined that she had something to say to him of importance, which was intended for his ear alone.

It was an odd meeting, between these two; they were well matched, clever, unfettered by

conventionalities, insensible to scruples of any kind. Each wore a mask, and was conscious that it might have been discarded on this occasion, for it was a transparency disguising nothing. Crévy had come from the Elysée in bitter anger against the Président, who had temporised on the subject of the war, and who, he knew, had determined to throw off the yoke of his influence, a result which Crévy had foreseen for some time, and had been preparing for. He was just in a mood to wreak his vengeance on the first person who crossed his path. The Princess had come to offer a victim to this Parisian Juggernaut—the irony of it was that he had been her lover.

"You have recently arrived from London?"

"Yes, to-day."

"There is something fresh then — in London."

"No, in Paris."

"Ah, then you bring news!"

"Not to Monsieur Crévy—who knows everything. I came because of certain papers."

"The world is full of documents; some of them are interesting, some are not. Of which class are you speaking?"

"Monsieur Crévy knows better than I do, for he has had them in his own hands. I have not."

"The British Government is interested in recovering these papers of which you speak?"

"Possibly! I am not in the secrets of the Court of St. James. That is, they do not confide in me."

The Princess rubbed her delicately gloved hands over one another. She was stating a distinction, which was also a difference.

"I understand. Then it is not the British Government which sends you here to look after these strayed papers. Pray who is it? I presume you have come to tell me."

"Yes, I have come for that purpose. It was M. Boisdeffre. He telegraphed for me to come."

Crévy was distinctly surprised. He had not expected this announcement.

"I told him originally where the papers were, and I suppose he thought I should be useful in helping to recover them, now that he has lost them again."

"There was, I think, a tie, an attachment"—Crévy waved his *pince-nez*—"doubtless of the flimsiest nature, between you and Monsieur Boisdeffre years ago—before either of you saw fit to change your names."

"There was," said Stéphanie impassive.

"I suppose when Boisdeffre took you into partnership, Princess, in the matter of the

letters, he intended that you should share in the results of his enterprise—financially, and . . . and . . . otherwise?"

"I stipulated that the terms should be sufficiently liberal to enable me to dispense with the income I am already enjoying," replied Stéphanie, with refreshing candour.

Crévy was thinking of a certain document with which he had refreshed Boisdeffre's memory only that very day, in which one of three clauses ran: "First, that I will renounce *for ever* all claims I may have on Stéphanie Dubois." Felix was treading on forbidden ground when he renewed his relationship with Stéphanie Dolgorouki.

"Your terms have not been fulfilled?"

"He hopes they may still be."

"Monsieur Boisdeffre seems to be a person of a buoyant nature. He was a little depressed in this room a few hours ago; but, doubtless, his natural characteristic has restored his confidence—especially in view of the goal of his desires." Crévy bowed to the Princess, while his eyes appraised her charms with sufficient unreserve.

"Monsieur Boisdeffre has schemes."

"That is not unusual with him. He has never had anything else."

"He is at present engaged in prosecuting them."

Crévy knew the Princess was coming to the point of the interview.

"May I ask where?"

"At the Bureau of the Chief of Police."

"He can hardly expect the police to assist in recovering stolen papers," suggested Crévy, who either had not yet suspected the real drift of his visitor, or wished to compel her to be more explicit.

"His interview has not directly to do with the lost manuscripts. Monsieur Boisdeffre does not remember with gratitude the part you have played in this affair, and he has gone to the police to impart some information he acquired from yourself."

Crévy's brow darkened. He showed his real feelings for the first time during the interview. Snap! He had broken the gold bridge of his *pince-nez*. Crévy flung the two parts into the fireplace.

"Has he even dared to do that?" he said.

The Princess did not answer for a minute or two. Then she said—

"You trusted too much in the power of fear, and forgot there are others as operative factors in life."

"Namely?"

"Love and avarice,"

"Then he expected to gain a good deal by this?"

"You have a value," she said calmly. "Besides, if Monsieur Crévy were out of the way, the recovery of the papers would not be difficult."

"I see! In the confusion following upon my arrest, and that of my friends"—he looked at the Princess wondering how much she knew—"Boisdeffre hoped to visit this house and annex the contents of a bureau I have upstairs. In addition he would have whatever reward the police might give him—or the Président;" his face darkened again; "for the information he had brought."

Crévy got up and walked up and down the room for some minutes. The Princess sat quite still. Even she did not realise what momentous conclusions were being formed in the brain of this apparently insignificant looking little man.

Crévy was a man who came to rapid decisions. It was one of the elements of his greatness. When he came and sat down one would have imagined that this was an ordinary afternoon call, and no one uninitiated would have believed that in that busy brain the issues of life and death had been decided just before.

"I have to thank you, Princess. You have done me a great service, although neither I nor

those who act with me would have been delivered up into the hands of the police under any circumstances—please understand that. I have much to do in the next few hours. When I see you again you shall name your reward—and I shall not cavil at the amount.”

Stéphanie rose. Her calm self possession had never varied throughout the interview.

“I will call again to-morrow, or the day after,” she said, as she held out her hand.

It was not the fault of the Princess that she did not keep her word.

“Not to-morrow—the day after, for choice,—I shall be busy to-morrow.” An ominous shadow passed across his face.

“One thing more—you will not say anything about what you have told me—to anyone.”

“I am not likely to relate the conversation to Monsieur Boisdeffre,” she replied quietly.

Crévy bowed the Princess out; but he did not shake her hand.

“The man was her lover after all,” he said to himself, “when she was young, whatever he has become since.”

Crévy was not particular, but he drew the line at some things. He had always regarded Delilah as the least attractive heroine of ancient times. Stéphanie was conscious that he had not taken her hand, for she had offered it to

him twice. It was a surprise to her, for she had expected Crévy would make love to her. But the Princess did not now attract Crévy. She extorted his admiration. That was all. It is a different thing, sometimes.

As soon as Crévy was alone he sat down to scribble off some notes in a cypher which was unintelligible to all but the initiated. When these were finished, and despatched by the hand of two trusted servants, he went to the top of the house to a small lumber room, in which he kept a rifle and two or three guns, gunpowder, &c. Crévy put some of the powder into a tin box which he took downstairs with him. The first gong was sounding for dinner. He went to dress as usual, as if there was nothing unwonted in the air. Subsequently he dined alone, criticising the dishes and drinking his usual small modicum of claret. To be disturbed is a sign of weakness. Crévy was not weak.

Yet the next twenty-four hours would mean more to him than any he had passed through before, in a life that had not been devoid of excitement. After dinner he sent and ordered the cabman who had driven him from the station in the morning to call for him an hour earlier than the one originally indicated. Crévy had not had a minute's rest all day ; but he had slept like a child in the train. The suggestion

that he had spent the time looking over the papers he had carried off was quite beside the mark.

The Princess also supped alone that night. She had made up her mind to see what there was to be seen later on in the Rue de Varennes. It would interest her to be present at the *dénouement*.

She was a remarkable woman.

CHAPTER XXII

A DREADFUL SUGGESTION

ALPHONSE MOREAU, the captain of the *Léopard*, came to see Marcion Dacres, according to the instructions he had received from Boisdeffre, about an hour after the loss of Dulcima had been brought home to him. Dacres had quite come to the conclusion that his ward was the victim of some foul play. He had called Signor Servati, the landlord of the hotel, into conference, and Moreau found them together on his arrival. Servati had been doubly eager to assist when he was shown Father Moerin's ring; but as yet his co-operation had not resulted in anything definite. Every room in the hotel had been searched by Servati's instructions, and special attention had been paid to the apartments nearest the bedroom of the girl, and their joint sitting room. Nothing incriminating or suggestive had been found. The landlord was sure the servants

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knew nothing. Dacres had not thought it advisable to keep the sex of Dulcima a secret any longer, as it might assist in the success of the search if the facts were known.

Marcion was surprised to see Moreau, as in the stress of events which followed the departure from Havre he had forgotten all about the instructions which had been given.

The first question the captain of the *Léopard* asked was—

“What has become of Boisdeffre?”

The latter was his *bête noir*. He regarded Felix as at the bottom of every villainy under the sun. A man who has been nearly choked out of life retains the sensation long after the physical effects of attempted strangulation have actually passed. Moreau still felt Boisdeffre's fingers on his throat both metaphorically and literally.

“He has disappeared. He drugged us in the train; and from that time to this I have heard nothing of him.”

Moreau was buried in thought for a few minutes, then he looked first at Servati, then at Dacres. He spoke to the latter, but as it were appealed to the landlord of the hotel to acquiesce in the opinion he had formed.

“Did Monsieur Boisdeffre know that it was a mademoiselle dressed as a boy?”

Dacres repudiated the idea instantly.

"No! I am sure he didn't. Nothing was said to him to give him the slightest clue."

"No, nothing was *said*," assented Moreau. Then he added, "I did not notice your companion, Monsieur Dacres, much. I was not in a condition to do so. But I have a recollection, a sort of vision, tell me if it is something like—lightish blue eyes, darker lashes, eyebrows, and hair, red lips, and a chin with a dimple in the middle—she would be very pretty—as a girl?"

It sounded to Dacres almost like a desecration to hear this man describe Dulcima, but he could not but confess that, as far as it went, the impression left by the girl's features was accurate enough. It was like an indifferent photograph of features, whose beauty and charm consisted of expression which not even the best photograph could have indicated or reproduced.

"I have known Felix Boisdeffre for some time. We have talked together. His talk is ever of women."

"But I tell you," said Marcion angrily, "the disguise was perfect. I should not have known the difference myself."

"Monsieur might not," replied Moreau compassionately, and he turned to Servati for confirmation.

The Italian nodded. Moreau went on—
“Boisdeffre! He is different.”

Somehow the conviction was being forced home upon Dacres that the captain of the *Léopard* was right. He had a sinking sensation at the back of his heart as it were. He was being brought face to face with a thought he did not want to face. He said nothing, but he felt a creepy sensation under his skin, and he knew his face paled.

Moreau went on calmly with his logical sequence of ideas. “Boisdeffre administered chloroform to you both while you were sleeping. To do so he went close to mademoiselle. In her sleep she would take a deeper respiration than when she was awake. A woman breathes differently from a man. *Voilà!*”

As a matter of fact, as the reader knows, Moreau was perfectly correct in his conclusions so far. It was only the deduction, which was wrong, which neither he nor Dacres could tell.

“You think,” said Servati, “that this Monsieur Boisdeffre has gained access to the hotel”—Servati resented the idea, although he acquiesced in its plausibility—“and carried off the young lady while this gentleman was out this afternoon?”

“Certainly I do. I am sure of it.”

“But how? It is not so easy?” inquired

the landlord. Marcion was standing with one hand resting on the table. His tongue seemed to have lost its power of utterance, and his brain only performed its functions dully.

"Boisdeffre had given her chloroform *once*. Mademoiselle had gone up to her room to rest, and probably did not think to lock the door. Boisdeffre knew the hotel where Monsieur Dacres was staying, for he gave me the address."

"But how did he get in, unobserved? and once in, how did he find out the number of mademoiselle's bedroom?"

"Both are easy," replied Moreau triumphantly. "There is a back entrance, which is not watched, and rarely used in the afternoon; is it not so?" The landlord nodded. "In the hall, at the end near the passage, is the visitors' book, with the numbers of their rooms entered. Probably Monsieur Boisdeffre tried them both. Failing to find mademoiselle in one, he searched and was successful in the other."

Servati could not deny the plausibility of the theory, or its working out. He knew that in the quiet time of the day a great deal might be done unsuspected and unknown to any one by a clever rogue who watched his opportunity. The landlord made up his mind that stricter supervision should be ensured for the future.

It was now Dacres' turn to ask a question. His voice as he did so was thick, his speech hesitating.

"If this Boisdeffre wanted to carry off my ward, why did he not do so from the train, when both she and I were insensible? He could have pleaded that she was taken suddenly ill, and put her into a cab. It would be much easier than stealing into the hotel to carry her off."

Moreau was puzzled for a minute. Then his brow cleared.

"Boisdeffre was in pursuit of Monsieur Crévy and the papers, which were more to him even than mademoiselle; besides, he could wait for mademoiselle."

Dacres struck the table with his clenched fist.

"If he had done as you suggest, he would certainly have lost the object of which he was in pursuit. He could not have known my ward was sleeping?"

"What more natural after the night on the sea, and the effect of the drug still upon her. When he saw monsieur go out alone——"

Dacres started. "Do you think he was watching?"

"Of course. When you went out alone, he was certain. Boisdeffre went round to the

other entrance and watched his opportunity. The rest was easy."

Moreau shrugged his shoulders. It was all so clear to him—like solving a very easy riddle.

Dacres walked away from the two men with unsteady steps, and made for the open window. There was not much air stirring, but what there was he needed, every breath of it, in his nostrils. It had swept over him like a flood what this girl had come to mean to him, her bright freshness, her charm of carriage and bearing, her *espièglerie*. By her side he had not realised it. Separated from her it had suddenly come home to him. Then to think that she was carried off, drugged, at the mercy of this horrible, unscrupulous, shameless Boisdeffre! Dacres could have beaten his brains out against the window sash. It is an awful experience to a man to love with the one passion of his life and to see the gift bestowed on another, voluntarily, which to him is more than life. But there is no misery so poignant as to realise the terror which Marcion was realising then. Dulcima carried off against her will, powerless, drugged—and the waking up to knowledge and life in the power of such a man as Felix Boisdeffre! The veins in his forehead swelled. He felt a great nausea come

Dacres. I owe to you my life, and it is the least I can do to serve you ; but I also do not like the job, for I avoid the police as much as possible."

Moreau was frank at any rate. He had no doubt had excellent reasons many a time in his life for "avoiding" the police.

"I thank you both most heartily, and no one regrets the necessity more bitterly than I do. For myself I have kept the third course. I feel sure that Crévy knows where Boisdeffre is. I am going to make him tell me."

Servati stared at Dacres.

"I understood that Monsieur was here in Paris unknown to Monsieur Crévy, and in pursuit of an object which was directly at variance with his interests! Is it wise then, under any circumstances, to acquaint him with that which he will be so greatly pleased to know? In any case, it is easy to ask Monsieur Crévy; it is quite a different thing to get an answer from him if he does not wish to give one."

"This matter is paramount to every other consideration. And as to that I will have an answer."

"It is as well," said Servati, "that the police should also know Monsieur Dacres is at the house of Monsieur Crévy."

over him, far worse because it was mainly mental, not physical, than he had when roused from the effects of the chloroform. Dacres was like one on the verge of a fit. Moreau and Servati were talking, suggesting something. He did not know what it was, or whether they were addressing him. Physically exhausted after all those hours without sleep, mentally stunned, Marcion sank into a chair. If it had not been there he would have fallen to the ground.

"Fool that I was to let her come! I have brought her to this. I love her. She is all the world to me. Oh, my God, help us, help us!" He covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN SEARCH OF BOISDEFFRE

MARCION pulled himself together with a prodigious effort of the will. His intellect and determination of character resumed their sway. He reminded himself that every hour of Dulcima's enforced captivity increased her danger, that even now she might be calling to him for help, which he could not render, because of the successful secrecy with which she had been spirited away. Dacres could not keep still under such a maddening thought. He sprang to his feet, and came up to the two men.

"I feel sure you are right," he said to Moreau. "Boisdeffre must be found, and that immediately."

"Paris is a large place," said Servati, with a deprecating wave of the hand, "in which to find a man whose address is unknown! It is a matter of days, not of hours. I have tried it before."

"There are three ways," said Marcion, with decision, "and we must try them all. The first is through the police. They must have a description of my ward, and of the clothes she was wearing. The disguise will cover us with suspicion while we are in Paris, and we may be arrested as anarchists; but the risk must be run. In the second place, Father Moerin must be communicated with, and his help secured. May I leave that with you, Signor Servati, if Monsieur Moreau undertakes the police?"

Dacres twisted the ring on his finger to remind the landlord that he was pledged to serve him.

"Certainly I will do it," said Servati. "I am naturally sorry this should have occurred at my hotel. Although I have followed my profession so many years in Paris, my nationality remains in the estimation of the Parisians; and, as a matter of fact, we Italians are very little more appreciated here than you English. It is also true that even French plotters themselves will often prefer to arrange their schemes and to stay themselves at an inn not kept by one of their own countrymen. The police know this perfectly, and we are always more or less kept under observation."

"I too will do what you wish, Monsieur

Dacres. I owe to you my life, and it is the least I can do to serve you; but I also do not like the job, for I avoid the police as much as possible."

Moreau was frank at any rate. He had no doubt had excellent reasons many a time in his life for "avoiding" the police.

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"This matter is paramount to every other consideration. And as to that I will have an answer."

"It is as well," said Servati, "that the police should also know Monsieur Dacres is at the house of Monsieur Crévy."

This was said to Moreau, and meant very little to him, as the captain of the *Léopard* was not well up in the *personnel* of the inmost circle of French political life.

"I will tell them," he said, "but I do not quite understand."

"They will know where to look for monsieur."

"When?"

"When he does not return," said the landlord gravely. Dacres was not attending. He was preparing in his mind what he should say to Crévy.

"You mean?" exclaimed Moreau in surprise. He finished the sentence by drawing his hand significantly across his throat.

"More refined than that, but quite as effectual," replied Servati. Crévy had certainly acquired a sinister reputation.

Servati and Moreau went off immediately in their several directions. Both the police and Father Moerin promised all the help in their power; but could afford no immediate assistance or suggest any enlightenment. On the face of it the affair was an abduction, and perhaps both the priest and the chief of police were inclined to take a rather harsh view of Dulcima's masquerade as a boy. They thought she had brought the punishment on herself.

The chief of police had, of course, seen Boisdeffre that very afternoon. He did not vouchsafe the information. The man was known to him, but not his present location. He would, however, have the affair sifted and Boisdeffre examined. If he was a party to the abduction he would be made to restore the young lady. As a matter of fact, the chief felt sure he had nothing to do with it, as his hands were full of other matters. This view was the correct one.

Dacres went straight to Crévy's mansion. All attempts at concealment were at an end. The imminence of his ward's danger was the first and now only consideration. Marcion had his pistol ready to hand, and meant to get the information he required by force if necessary. He was so excited and impatient he could hardly wait for the door to be answered, and felt strongly tempted to turn the handle and walk straight in. He was not kept a minute, however.

"Is your master in?" Dacres demanded of the tall, impassive man-servant.

"Yes, sir."

"Please to take him my card and say I should be obliged if he would grant me an interview immediately on important business."

The tall man-servant retired with the pasteboard on the salver. The name of Dacres

was quite familiar to Crévy, although he had never seen its owner. He naturally imagined that the solicited interview had to do with the impounded papers. His glance turned for a moment to the drawer which no longer contained them. Dacres was a trifle behind the day. The documents were safely housed at the Elysée. Not that he would have got them out of Crévy in any case.

"Show the gentleman up, Pierre."

In a couple of minutes Marcion stood in the room which had already witnessed two extraordinary interviews that day—those with Boisdeffre and the Princess Stéphanie. If walls could tell their story the disclosures in many cases would make interesting reading.

Crévy rose and bowed, but did not hold out his hand. Neither did Marcion proffer his.

"Pray be seated. I am afraid I can only give you a few minutes, monsieur, as I am on the eve of going to an important engagement."

The "engagement" was with an inanimate (in one sense) object, namely, the gunpowder, which lay before the master of the house in a tin box on the table.

"Thank you! I shall not detain you a minute. I have only come to ask you one question, Monsieur Crévy, and that answered

satisfactorily I shall be glad to take my leave immediately."

Marcion was obviously labouring under strong excitement, but Crévy did not consider this at all remarkable, considering the immense value of the papers he had lost.

"I will try to answer any question you may put to me."

"I want to know exactly where M. Boisdeffre is at the present time?"

"It is of minor moment, and pray do not reply to the question if inconvenient; but I should like to ask for what purpose you are looking for that amiable and honourable gentleman?"

Crévy was pleased to be sarcastic.

"He has stolen a lady—my ward—who came with me on a visit to Paris a few hours ago."

Crévy stared at Dacres in genuine astonishment. He had expected one thing and got something quite different.

"Pardon me, monsieur, but—are you sure of your facts? It is not unlike Monsieur Boisdeffre, but I have good reason to think that he has been otherwise employed"—Crévy thought, but did not say, "part of the time in betraying me."

"Boisdeffre is the only person who could have known my ward's whereabouts."

Marcion, likewise, had a mental reserve, and did not add that Felix was the only person who was likely to have a clue to his ward's sex.

"At what hour did this—abduction"—Crévy hesitated before he said the word—"take place?"

Dacres named the hours during which he had been absent from the hotel.

"You may make your mind quite easy. I can answer for it. Boisdeffre was otherwise employed during the whole of that time. He had not time to abduct any one, however much he may have wished it."

Dacres was not convinced. He had been convinced by Moreau's reasoning that he was on the track of the abductor, and for all he knew, Crévy might have his own reasons for screening Boisdeffre, who had almost certainly gone over to his side in the matter of the stolen papers.

"This affair of mine may not have taken more than a few minutes. I must see Boisdeffre and satisfy myself."

Crévy did not reply for a minute or two. He was evidently revolving in his mind the question, "Shall I bring this man into touch with Boisdeffre or shall I not?" In the end he decided that no harm would come to his own plans from complying.

"I do not know exactly where Boisdeffre is at the present moment, but I can find out." He rang a bell, and his secretary came in. "Find out where Monsieur Boisdeffre is now, please."

The secretary bowed and retired. While they sat waiting for the answer Marcion could not help being struck with the extraordinary power this man conveyed, his absolute self-possession, unruffled composure, and certitude of knowledge. Who was this man whose system was so perfect that he could lay his hands at a moment's notice on any one, in whose quest he happened to be interested? The silence was broken by a question. Marcion was roused from his meditation to find Crévy's shrewd eyes scanning him intently.

"From what hotel was this young lady removed?"

"Servati's."

The muscles of Crévy's face did not relax, but there was a flicker of something about the eyes. It was as if he had found a key to a lock which was missing before. He said nothing, and at this moment the secretary reappeared.

"Monsieur Boisdeffre is dining at the Café Delormes."

Both men rose, and in two minutes Marcion

was in the street again. Not a word had been said about the papers on either side. When Crévy was once more alone he smiled to himself.

“This Englishman is evidently very much in love with the young lady who invades Paris in doublet and hose. He will find Boisdeffre, but he will not thereby find what he seeks.”

CHAPTER XXIV

A TERRIBLE NIGHT

FELIX BOISDEFFRE had been strangely restless since his interview with the Chief of Police. That astute official had been only too glad to receive the information the informer brought. The power of the Ten in Paris had been a standing menace to Paris, and indeed to France for a long time. Many illegal acts had been traced to the action of this irresponsible committee. Hitherto it had been impossible to get them into a net to solve the mystery of their identity, or to find out their place of meeting. Crévy had been suspected for a long time of complicity, but no proof could be brought home to him. His apparent friendship for Président Didot was a complicating circumstance in the affair. The Chief of the Police did not feel at liberty to act on Boisdeffre's information until he had consulted the head of the State. He found, however, no difficulty in

that quarter. The rupture between the two men, which had been pending for some time, had practically taken place. Crévy had discounted it beforehand—he was the cleverer and less honest man of the two—Didot acted upon it afterwards.

“I have no wish to screen Monsieur Crévy. If he is guilty of treason against the State, and the fact is brought home to him, he must take the consequences.”

The Chief's hands being free, he set about his measures to entrap the conspirators. He hoped, by the rapidity of the stroke and the completeness of the surprise, to obtain possession of incriminating documents as well as of the persons implicated themselves. The unoccupied house in the Rue de Varennes was placed under supervision immediately, and impressions in wax were taken after nightfall of the locks of the doors, and keys made to fit.

Crévy was actually in the house when some of this was being done, having entered by a secret way through the wine cellar, which it would take a clever man to discover. It just fitted with his daring nature and sardonic humour to be behind a tapestry, while his enemies were bungling along in their vain efforts to get him into their power. He had gone with a purpose as well, for he carried

with him the tin box full of gunpowder, and a mechanical contrivance which would ensure the powder being ignited at the opportune moment. Crévy kept this part of the affair in his own hands from sheer enjoyment of the act of doing it.

Boisdeffre in the meanwhile, as has been said, could settle to nothing. His nerves shattered by the life he had led, were not nearly so stable as they had been, and the physical exhaustion and want of proper rest of the last few days had told upon him. He was playing for enormous stakes, and had to leave the cards at the end in other people's hands. Waiting at critical moments is the most trying thing in the world. As the day wore on restlessness merged in foreboding, the presage of imminent ill. The cloud was on his brow when he went to dine at Delormes, a favourite resort of his when in Paris. Felix secured a small room to himself on the right of the large *salle à manger*. He hardly touched any food, although generally possessed of a vigorous appetite. He compensated for his abstinence by drinking deeply. Gradually, under the influence of the wine, his brow cleared. The visions of the future became rosy. He was to be revenged on Crévy and marry Stéphanie. He saw a mental inventory

of her physical charms in the ruby liquor in his glass, and his eyes glittered with anticipated satisfaction.

To him Dacres suddenly entered.

Boisdeffre sat back in his chair and laughed—laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. It was all Marcion could do to restrain himself from striking him with his fist in the face. Only the conviction that Felix held the secret of Dulcima's whereabouts restrained him.

Dacres rarely swore. He swore now, however, between his set teeth, and asked what Boisdeffre was laughing at.

"Pardon me, monsieur ; but you were sleeping so soundly when I saw you last."

Marcion boiled over at the thought of the effrontery of this man, who played the traitor one minute and treated the affair as a huge joke the next.

Dacres gripped Felix by the arm with such force that it seemed the very bones must crack. The Englishman was white with rage.

"You traitor! You sneak! You coward! Tell me what you have done with the girl or I'll break every bone in your body."

There was no one in the room. The two men were alone. Boisdeffre had already experienced the power of this man's hand. The grip on his arm hurt him. It was growing

numb in Marcion's clasp. He was afraid, and the fear drove out the fumes of the wine he had drunk and sobered him.

"Girl!" he exclaimed. "What girl? I know of no girl. Loose my arm. You are breaking it."

Dacres relaxed his clasp a little.

"You know that it was a girl with me in the steamer and in the railway carriage—my ward."

"Oh, that girl! Yes; I know it was a girl. I found it out when I—got close to her." The hand gripped him again. Moreau was right in his surmise. "*Sacré!* Don't do that! I swear I have never seen her from that time to this. Have you lost her?"

Marcion looked deep into Boisdeffre's eyes as if he would read their very secrets.

"My God!" he said, "if you are lying I swear I will shoot you at sight. I will kill you as I would a viper."

A solitary star was shining near the horizon. The day had gone, and the night was advancing rapidly—the most terrible night Marcion was ever likely to spend. His first act was to rush back to his rooms—an electric tram carried him almost to the door of the hotel—to see if Dulcima had returned or whether there was any news. Signor Servati was on the look-out for him. The police had promised Moreau that inquiries should be made from end to end of the capital. Father Moerin had sent a note. Dacres tore it open with feverish eagerness, although he felt sure there could be no good news in it.

“DEAR FRIEND,—I sympathise deeply with your loss, and all our sources of information will be utilised. I cannot hold out much hope of a solution to-night. The affair is inexplicable. Had it been yourself I could have understood. Now that you have been to C. beware! Look to yourself! Paris is seething with various movements, the results of which the good God only knows. We have had an inkling of a plot against the life of Président Didot, but as yet have failed to ascertain its truth, or to get any details. I will come to you either late at night or early in the morning. Meantime trust me to work for you. I also pray. Go

armed. Look into doorways. See what is behind you. Eat and drink with suspicion. The blow that has been struck may be the precursor of another. Tear this up.

“ M.”

Dacres could not rest at the hotel. He went out again into the streets. During those few minutes it seemed that the pall of night had settled over the city. The stars had come out. The moon was past its full, and a dark shadow rested on one side of it. The shadow was on the heart of Dacres as well. True, he had lost his horrible fear of Boisdeffre, and of the nameless dread which had seized him when he thought *Dulcima* was delivered up into his hands. But what was left was enough. He began to believe that she was dead. Somewhere in the empyrean her spirit might be hovering over him now. Around him was the buzzing life of the great city, flashing, brilliant, with its myriad eyes, its gay crowds thronging the boulevards. Dacres felt apart from it all. Despair and weariness possessed his soul. Again and again he returned to the hotel, in hopes that something might have turned up, always to be met by the stereotyped answer, “ No, she is not come ; there is no news.”

The night dragged its slow length along. Dacres, utterly worn out, was standing near Notre Dame, when he saw a crowd round some police. They were carrying something along. Suddenly there came across his dulled perceptions the fact that he was near the Morgue, that penultimate resting-place of Parisian despair. With a horrible foreboding in his heart, Marcion elbowed his way through the crowd until he could see what the police were conveying. A dead man of the working classes lay on a stretcher. Ah! the Morgue; why had he not thought of it before? He joined the sad procession, and, by the help of a liberal bribe, was allowed to enter the mortuary itself with the police. A man and a woman lay cold and still under the gaslights flaring above them awaiting the third now to bear them company. Sick and faint, though reassured on that point, Dacres staggered out and over the St. Louis bridge. The body of Dulcima was not of that company. Marcion got into a cab, and told the driver to take him back to Servati's. In a few minutes he must have dropped from sheer weariness. There was a gnawing pain at his stomach. He remembered that he had not tasted food for hours. Stopping the cab he entered a restaurant, and taking his place at the counter, called for some sandwiches and a

small bottle of wine. Only when he began to eat and drink, did Dacres know how famished and faint he was. Gradually, as he ate and drank, his mental and physical strength began to return, and with it his perception of what he must do. If he were to wander all night he would obviously be no nearer a solution of the mystery, and in the morning, instead of being refreshed and ready to renew the search, he would be incapable of prosecuting it. No one could go through what he had done since he left England without food, without sleep, and not break down under it. Gradually the conclusion forced itself upon him that he must go back to the hotel, and snatch a few hours' rest before the morning dawned.

Dacres had just finished the sandwiches and wine, and paid for them, when there came the sound of an explosion on the startled air. This was followed by a deep silence, as if all the noise of the city had been suddenly stilled. Paris had been in an electric state for days. Every one expected something to happen: no one knew what. The sudden sound, followed by an equally impressive silence, indicated that it had come. In a couple of minutes, spent in recovering from the surprise, every one in the restaurant had rushed to the door and out into the boulevard, Dacres one of

the foremost. He went to the kerb and spoke to the cabman.

"What was that noise?"

"It sounded like an explosion, sir. Something has blown up, I fancy. Look there!"

He pointed in the direction of the Hôtel des Invalides. A column of what looked like smoke or dust was ascending to the sky.

Men were running along the pavement in the direction from which the sound had proceeded. Marcion had turned into a monomaniac. He had come to fancy that everything out of the way must have to do with the loss of Dulcima, and afford a key to his quest. Jumping into the cab, he said, "Make for the Hôtel des Invalides as fast as you can." Other vehicles were already going in the same direction. They had only to follow the stream. Soon the congestion became so great that the cab could only advance at a foot's pace. Dacres bore it as long as he could, and then jumped out and paid his fare. He had come to the conclusion that he could do the rest of the short distance that remained quicker on foot.

As he reached the scene of action the police were to be seen helping to disperse the crowds and to prevent the congestion. They were, however, powerless to deal with the vast numbers of people which had collected together.

Then there was heard the even rhythm of horses' feet on the road, and the jingle of accoutrements and trappings. A regiment of horse soldiers had been speedily summoned and was coming down the street in fours' formation. The civil and military authorities were at this time keenly on the alert for an *émeute*, not knowing when or where the uneasy undercurrent of political disturbance might show itself and become dangerous. The crowd was compelled to make a way for the soldiers, who enforced their orders when necessary with the flat of their swords. On the whole—for a Parisian crowd—the people were wonderfully orderly. There was evidently no concerted movement towards a revolution, as the authorities had feared.

The police, assisted by the soldiers, made two lanes of route, one for those advancing to the Rue de Varennes, where every one now knew an explosion had taken place, the other for those coming from the scene.

Marcion was at the extreme edge of the advancing body, and nearest consequently to those emerging from the street. In the front ranks of the latter were men bearing hastily improvised supports for the bodies of those who had been injured or killed. These were mainly police; but one was a woman. Dacres shud-

dered, although the rich dress told him at once that it was not Dulcima. Slowly he was swept onwards, slowly the other procession drew near, until Marcion was close to the body of the woman, borne on a shutter by four men. A falling stone had struck her on the chest over the heart, and crushed the life out of her. Dacres recognised her instantly, and a great sob of emotion rose up in his throat. It was the woman whom at one time he had admired and fancied he loved, the woman who had wormed his secret out of him, and then betrayed it to Boisdeffre.

The dead woman was Stéphanie Dolgorouki.

CHAPTER XXV

AWAITING THE STROKE OF DOOM

FELIX BOISDEFFRE sat over his wine at the *café* where he had dined until ten o'clock. Then he lighted a cigar and went out into the street. A desire had come over him to see the Princess Dolgorouki before going to the rendezvous in the Rue de Varennes. All the passion of the man, and what heart he possessed, were locked up in Stéphanie. He laughed to himself at the idea of his being impressed by the lissom maid, who had chosen to trick herself out as a boy, when he had within touch the opulent charms of the love of his life. Boisdeffre infinitely preferred an elegant *embonpoint*. At the hotel he was informed that the Princess was out. He was disappointed and surprised, but consoled himself with the thought that she would be in later to receive his report of the successful *coup* in the Rue de Varennes. Boisdeffre was unconscious of the fact that he was shadowed the whole

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way by one of Crévy's agents. That gentleman's vengeance on his betrayer was only biding its time.

Near the hotel Boisdeffre walked into the arms of Moreau, or rather stumbled up against him before either recognised the other's identity. Felix, like Dacres before, had quite forgotten the instructions to the captain of the *Léopard* to follow them to Paris.

"What new villainy are you meditating, Monsieur Boisdeffre?" inquired Moreau.

"Nothing that requires your assistance, anyway," replied Felix. "You have come up to Paris on a fool's errand."

"I suppose you are equally successful. The atmosphere of the place does not seem to agree with you."

Boisdeffre, between the wine he had taken, the nervous agitation he was in, and his recent disappointment in not finding the Princess, betrayed his irritability in the tones of his voice—indications which Moreau, who hated him intensely, was quick to read.

"You think so, Monsieur Moreau? You are vastly clever. Do you know that at this moment I am the most powerful man in Paris?"

Verily Boisdeffre had consumed more Burgundy than was good for him.

"A riddle, no doubt," said Moreau contemptuously, "which it passes me to read."

"Come with me, and I will show you," Boisdeffre replied confidently.

"I don't mind, as I have a pistol on me," assented the sailor caustically. He saw that there was something in the wind, and guessed that Boisdeffre had driven out his stock of caution by taking in an over-stock of something else. "I will show you what happens to the people who cross my path. It may be a lesson to you, Alphonse."

So saying, Boisdeffre walked on ahead with somewhat uncertain step, Moreau, much mystified, following. They passed through comparatively unfrequented thoroughfares, until they came to the Rue de Babylone, Felix purposely going a roundabout way to fill up the time. Having traversed this street, they came out on the Boulevard des Invalides, and so reached the end of the Rue de Varennes. Here Moreau noticed that there was an unusual number of police about, not grouped together, but walking apparently aimlessly. Boisdeffre nodded somewhat ostentatiously to a tall man out of uniform, and then went and exchanged a sentence or two with him; and Moreau noticed that when a policeman passed the tall man he saluted. He felt sure it was a

high officer of the force in mufti. So said the sailor to himself, "Boisdeffre has become an *espion de police*. Well, it is what one might have expected. It is the inevitable end." He judged that some big *coup* was in meditation. Directly they entered the Rue de Varennes, at the end near the empty house Crévy had indicated, Boisdeffre was startled to see the Princess Dolgorouki standing opposite to it. She did not see him, but was gazing intently at the doomed house. It would have looked desolate and deserted but for one thing. The upper windows of the mansion were all shuttered. But through a chink in the shutters of one room came rays of light. There was a lamp in that room. Five minutes previously it had been quite dark. What was the meaning of that? Stéphanie was puzzled. She had warned Crévy, and doubtless he had notified his fellow-conspirators. Besides, no one had entered the deserted house certainly within the last half-hour, during which she had been stationed opposite to it. Yet a light had been placed in the room during the last five minutes.

The fact was that even Stéphanie did not adequately estimate the nature of Jean Crévy. His ferocity was only equalled by his courage. It was not sufficient for him to escape from the wiles of his enemies, he must take them in

their own toils. Not only so, he must be present and see the results of his own handiwork. A quarter of an hour ago, timed to the minute, he had entered the house by the secret entrance, which had long been used by the Ten for their meetings, and to which access could be gained through a couple of cellars, so that there was no need to approach the house directly either from the front or the back ; the police, of course, took excellent care of the obvious outlets. Then he had arranged the lamp on a table in the room, having tampered with the shutter at his previous visit so as to create that chink. It was his decoy duck for the police. Then he went down, put on a false beard and moustache, and calmly mixed with the police and others to await the *dénouement*.

Boisdeffre went up and touched the Princess on the shoulder. She turned and recognised him. For a moment a look of intense fear passed across her beautiful eyes. She had always been afraid of this man, even when she had given herself to him in apparent love—perhaps then most of all. Had he guessed her perfidy, and come to work out his retribution ? Stéphanie saw Moreau standing near ; but they were unknown to one another. Boisdeffre's first words reassured her.

"They are nicely caught in a trap. The

police tell me the house is watched back and front, and there is a light in one of the upper rooms. They evidently do not know of that tell-tale crack in the shutter. Have you been here long? I went to look for you at your hotel, but they told me you were out. I never guessed that you would be here before me. Darling Stéphanie, it was good of you to come. We shall soon see the result of our little scheme. By the by, do you know how long that light has been there? Have you noticed it before?"

The Princess answered in tones she vainly tried to deprive of their nervous timbre.

"It has only just come—not five minutes ago."

Boisdeffre, in spite of the amount of liquor he had taken, noticed Stéphanie's nervousness, but set it down very naturally to the same causes, which had made him despondent and anxious before dinner; as he himself put it—"they had so much at stake." Moreau, seeing Boisdeffre engaged in conversation with a lady, had walked on up the street, and taken his place about twenty yards further on, where he could see perfectly, although not in such close proximity.

The Princess whispered to Felix: "We had better not be seen together. We are both too well known. Had you not better follow your

friend? Meet me at my hotel half an hour after it is all over."

Felix could not help smiling when she applied the title "friend" to Moreau. The scene in the cabin of the *Léopard* came back upon his mental retina, when he had nearly strangled the captain, and would have done quite but for the interposition of Dacres.

"Very well," he replied; "I daresay you are right. You women are always on the side of caution. I will go and join my 'friend' as you call him. Goodbye for the present, dearest Stéphanie."

He sauntered off.

The Princess followed his retreating figure, every line of which she knew so well, with a curious gaze. She felt confident she was looking at him for the last time. Crévy was not a man to forgive the perfidy which had been practised upon him, nor was he at all scrupulous in the matter of human life. Stéphanie, watching Boisdeffre as he lurched along, knew he was a doomed man, and that the doom would not have long to wait. No, he would not join her at her hotel as she had suggested, half an hour after this affair was over, which would turn out so differently from his expectations. Did any regrets come to this Delilah of the pavements at this moment? Had she any thought of the

times when his lips had rested on hers, of the big strong arms which had been about her neck, of the vows they had exchanged when she was but a girl, although already possessed to the full of her regal beauty, when he was just Auguste and she Stéphanie? The love of life was strong in them then. It stretched out before them. Now the horizon had closed about both of them. She knew it for him, not for herself. Yet Delilah never winced. She would not have put forth a finger to save Boisdeffre if she could. She feared him, and she was tired of him. The sooner he "went under" the better. After all, the final wave of the sea of life surges somewhere for all of us. What matter if it be close to or a little further off? The Princess was a philosopher—as regards the lives of others. She little thought her own deserved doom lay in that silent house opposite.

Crévy had come out now into the Rue de Varennes. He saw the Princess standing there opposite the house, and he laughed in his throat. He alone of the millions of Paris knew what was about to happen. The clock-work was rapidly completing its fatal revolutions. The last would strike a light and set the store of powder in a blaze with the destruction of all who were within the house or

sufficiently near to it to share in the catastrophe. Of these the man who had conceived the idea with his devilish ingenuity, knew that the Princess would be one. Save her! Warn her! Not he. She was a traitress, even if her treachery had been on his side. Let her go to her doom. She had earned it; one more often than not gets in this life what we have paid for. Stéphanie Dolgorouki, Stéphanie, who had risen from the slums of Marseilles to a house in Park Lane, and to be the hostess of statesmen and diplomatists—what an irony it was!—would meet her doom in the *débris* of that wrecked house. Crévy laughed again, a silent, awesome laugh in his false beard, when he saw Boisdeffre move away from the side of the Princess to the safer vantage ground where Moreau was already standing. He had escaped one risk; but the end was none the less sure for all that.

Crévy drew very near to Boisdeffre and Moreau, placing himself where he could keep his eye on them and on the house, and the police who had now gone up to the door at the same time. Felix was not under his surveillance only, for two or three other men had placed themselves near to him to be ready if Crévy required them. Boisdeffre was joking with Moreau in happy unconscious-

ness of the net which was being spread about him.

"Ah, Monsieur Moreau, you will see directly. There will be great doings to-night. They think they can play with Felix Boisdeffre—you thought so too, and you found out your mistake when I had my hands on your wind-pipe. Now they will find it when the police have them like rats in a trap. Ah, it is not good to threaten, to strive to intimidate Felix Boisdeffre. He bides his time, and then he strikes."

Suiting the action to the words, the big man hit himself with his fist across the chest. Crévy was standing close to the two men, close enough to hear every word.

Felix turned and looked at Crévy, who had come close up so quietly that he had not been noticed, either by himself or Moreau. He did not recognise him. Yet there was a look in those steel-grey eyes which sent the blood back from his face, and a cold shudder down his back like a douche.

Meantime the police were thundering at the door of the deserted house.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CATASTROPHE

“**O**PEN! Open! In the name of the police.”

A loud knocker was brought into action ; but without results. The silence that followed seemed to be more profound for the din which had preceded it. The residents in the houses adjoining the deserted villa came pouring out of their doors, voluble in their assurance that no one lived there. They were roughly told to stand on one side. In the meantime a crowd was collecting with that unerring instinct for the sensational which the dwellers in big cities always seem to possess. The police formed a cordon on either side, allowing no one to pass beyond it. Somehow they did not interfere with the Princess. Perhaps her commanding appearance, stately bearing, and rich dress, combined to give her sufficient distinction to escape the common lot of the multitude. It

would have been better for her had it been otherwise, as it turned out.

Meantime the police had opened the hall door of the villa with one of the keys which had been fashioned only an hour or two previously for the purpose. About half a dozen of them rushed upstairs, while an equal number searched the ground-floor and basement. Both entrances were guarded with a closer vigilance than ever. Still the Princess looked at that light showing through the chink in the shutter and wondered. Who had been so recently into the deserted house? When there, why had the lamp been lighted and left burning? The solution of these mysteries was near at hand, but not for her.

In a second a vast awe of fear had settled down on the expectant crowd. They buried their heads in their arms, and those on the outskirts fled as far as their legs could carry them from the scene of that awful disaster, quickened by the dread that it was only the precursor of others. Paris, long trembling on the edge of a crater, believed that the eruption had actually commenced. One man alone stood absolutely impassive, watching the hurly-burly with coldly sarcastic eyes, and that was the author of it all, Jean Crévy. He was neither surprised nor afraid, only satisfied that

all had taken place exactly as he had planned it. There had not been a flaw or a hitch anywhere.

When the police reached the upper landing of the house, and burst into the room in which the lamp was calmly burning, they found it was empty. They made a hasty search, and then rushed back to the landing to do the same by the other rooms. Suddenly there was a bright flash, a volume of dense black smoke, and then a crash, which reverberated for miles, and brought all the upper storeys of the villa in a crumbling ruin on to the floor below. The masonry of the windows was blown out, and huge boulders flew in all directions. One knocked the Princess down in an instant. She fell, clenching her hands, gasped a few times, and then lay back quite dead. More than twenty of the police were more or less injured, a dozen of them mortally. Some of the bystanders were struck, but not seriously hurt, thanks to the cordons which had prevented them from approaching as nearly as they otherwise would have done to the scene of the disaster.

The horror of the scene baffles description. A great column of dust and smoke rose up to the sky through the rent roof of the villa. On one side half the wall of the next house had been blown in, and the wrecked masonry lay

among the *débris* of shattered furniture. The street was strewn with slates, stones, and wood. The air resounded with the shrieks of the frightened crowd, a proportion of which was women, and the groans of the wounded and dying. Fortunately the house did not catch fire, or an added element would have accumulated on the top of the catastrophe, bad enough in all conscience as it was. The police who had escaped unhurt showed great courage and presence of mind. Under the direction of the tall man in plain clothes, the work of rescue of those still living and the search for the dead commenced at once. It was a hazardous as well as difficult task, for there was perpetual danger of the fall of other parts of the masonry, of which the supports had been torn away. In addition, there was the fear felt by hundreds, who were on the side of order, that what had happened was only the beginning of the end, that there was worse to follow. A mysterious blow, obviously premeditated, had been struck, who could say where, and upon whom the next would fall? The news was telephoned immediately to the Elysée. The Président started at once for the Rue de Varennes. For Didot, whatever else he might be, was a brave man. Madame Didot sat white and still, alone in the great palace, waiting. For she feared for the

husband whom she loved with a passionate devotion. Thus it has ever been. The men go forth to face danger. It is the easier lot. Women sit still and wait, while their faces are blanched and their hearts quake. Minutes become hours; hours are transformed into days, while love is chilled by fear. Theirs is infinitely the harder destiny.

Felix Boisdeffre, with his brain already confused with wine and want of proper rest, was stunned by the suddenness of the awful calamity. He saw the Princess fall; but was powerless to go to her assistance. All his faculties were numbed. He could hardly stand upon his feet. A beam of wood fell close to him from the roof. He could not have stepped on one side to avoid it. A paralysis of his faculties had seized him when the gunpowder did its unexpected work, and all the fabric of his designs was swept away again for the second time in a moment.

Moreau had given back a few paces when the explosion took place. His profession had taught him instant action, and presence of mind in an emergency. Directly the first breathless pause had passed, he looked round for Boisdeffre. He felt certain that the man he hated was at the bottom of the foul deed. He had boasted only a few minutes ago, that he was

the most powerful man in France. This was what he meant. Moreau knew him to be absolutely unscrupulous and reckless. He had sought to take his, Moreau's, own life only a few hours ago. The feeling of that grip was still on the windpipe of the captain of the *Léopard*. Well, he should not escape this time. He himself would denounce him as partaker or instigator of this final atrocity. Moreau uttered a fearful oath of hatred and vengeance. He turned to look for Boisdeffre at the place where they had been standing together. The great beam of wood lay on the pavement. Boisdeffre had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVII

BEFORE THE DREAD TRIBUNAL

A HAND was laid upon Boisdeffre's arm, and the single word—ominous if he only knew it—'Seine,' was whispered in his ear. Some one else took hold of him on the other side. He was powerless to think, to act, to resist, a piece of flotsam on the river of destiny, the fate which hemmed him in. The two men hurried him along, dexterously making their way through the crowd in the wake of those who were fleeing from participation in the calamity. The direction taken was the exact opposite to that of the Hôtel des Invalides, and so did not bring them into contact with Dacres, who was at that very time approaching the other end of the Rue de Varennes. When they had reached the Boulevard d'Enfer, one of the men gave a low whistle, and almost instantly a cab drew up at the curb. It was the same cab, driven by the same man, which

had conveyed Crévy and Boisdeffre from St. Lazare Station previously. Felix was bundled into the conveyance. One man sprang on the box by the side of the driver, the other got in by the side of the captive. Without a word having been spoken, or a direction given, the *voiture*, which was only built to hold two, started on its journey. The man inside, after they had traversed two or three streets, put his hand up to his face and removed a heavy moustache and beard. Boisdeffre turned and looked at him. It was the man he had not recognised, and yet in a sense had recognised in the Rue de Varennes. For the second time in twenty-four hours, he was riding by the side of Jean Crévy.

Boisdeffre would like to have called out, but his tongue refused to act. That member was paralysed as well as his brain—paralysed now by fear. In his dulled way, Felix knew that he was going to his doom, that inexorable, implacable fate sat by his side in the cab. He had tried a fall with this man before, and been worsted. He had attempted to betray him, to deliver him up to the police, and he had failed again. Now his doom was sealed, and his executioner was there just as inevitably as if the basket yawned before him, and the fatal knife of the guillotine was pendant over his

head, yearning to strike the fatal blow. Felix saw the bright moonlight outside, the houses silhouetted in it. The Paris through which they were passing—he did not in the least know where he was—was strangely still. They had left the stir and the bustle, the human hum of the nervous city, behind them.

Slowly, of its own accord, Boisdeffre's brain was working, almost in despite of himself. He was quite sober now. How had Crévy been warned of the trap set for him? How did he know that Boisdeffre had betrayed him? It was not likely that the police—only the chief knew that he was the informant. The chief would be silent as the grave. He was so eager about this business, which would take from Paris its most dangerous element, and rob the city of the incubus which had been weighing on it for months. Stay! there was one other who knew, the only one in whom he had confided, whose interests had been bound up with his, who was to be made rich, and to share his life, as she already had his love, if he succeeded—if! terrible word, he had failed and was doomed—Was it possible that she had. . . . Over that stupefied brain there came a vision of the past, of the first time he had met her, young, vigorous, handsome beyond compare, early developed to a splendid maturity; the after-

noon they had spent in a tea-garden, the walk through a lane with high hedges on just such a night as this, the moonlight peeping in upon them through the tracery of the leaves and the intertwining branches of the elms. She had kissed him with that luscious embrace, which was hers alone. He could taste that first kiss still. He had always tasted it through the after years, whether near to her, or separated from her, most of all perhaps then. "Auguste" he was called then, "Auguste Lecomte." Now his name was Felix—Felix Boisdeffre. Felix! What an irony there was in the name. It meant happy. He had been taught that in the far-off days when he went to school. The tears started to his eyes, and began one by one to course down his cheeks. He had not cried since he was a child. 'Yes, she had betrayed him. She had gone from him to Crévy, and told his story, the story he had confided to her; as before she had wormed Dacres' secret out of him to tell to himself. It had not seemed perfidy, treachery then. It was only a smart trick. It was done for himself. Now he saw she was the same woman in both cases. Stéphanie had sold him to his enemy, sold him to Crévy within an hour of his parting from her. Truly the bitterness of death was passed; for he loved her with all his soul. He had

worked for her, lied for her, committed crimes for her without hesitation—and in the end she had kissed and betrayed him. Her last sentence rose up before him when she had bidden him meet her half an hour after their, nay his, plan was successfully carried to its conclusion. Yet she knew she should never see him again as her lover; for she had herself forged the very snare that should entrap him. Boisdeffre buried his face in his hands. His brain was quite clear now; but he no longer wished to live. Gladly he would welcome death, for death was kind. It meant oblivion, the wiping out of hideous memories.

Crévy looked on, impassive, cold, unmoved. Perhaps he understood something of what was working in this man's mind. If so, he betrayed no sign. He might have been cut out of a block of marble. Not a word was spoken throughout the whole of that long drive, during which the myriad clocks of Paris chimed the midnight hour.

The cab stopped without any direction having been given. The man on the box jumped down and opened the door of the *voiture*. Boisdeffre roused himself and looked up; his face was white and drawn. 'The bitterness of death was passed.' It is not given to many souls to endure the mental torture which Felix

had experienced during the last half hour, or a great cry would be raised to the Infinite Power.

The man at the door and Crévy together helped him out. They were at the entrance to a wild, tangled garden. Boisdeffre was guided through a wicket gate up a narrow moss-covered path. They came to a side door. Two men were standing on each side of this entrance. Directly the three men reached the step, the door was thrown open by some one within. The hall was dimly lighted by a single oil lamp hanging from a hook. The wick spluttered and smoked as if it had been recently lighted, and some water had got into the oil. Boisdeffre took in his environment mechanically. It might all have been happening to some one else and he a spectator. He had no fear, only the numbness of bitter despair. They traversed the whole length of the hall, and entered a large room in which the furniture was wormeaten and decayed. Crévy had given up his hold on Boisdeffre's arm to the man who had opened the hall door. He passed on in front and took his place at the head of the long mahogany table, at which several men had been sitting when Crévy entered, but who rose *en masse* to receive him. He sat down, and they all followed his example. They all had their hats on, and no attempt was

made to disguise any of their features. The room was fairly well lighted by two duplex lamps on the mantelpiece, and one on the table. Boisdeffre looked round mechanically. In a dazed way he recognised three who were present. Two of them were Deputies of standing and importance in the extreme Nationalist and Socialist section of the Chamber. The third was a General Officer, who openly wore his medals. They must have been very sure of their hold on the solitary victim and witness to have taken no steps towards concealment of identity. It was the very bravado of security. So Boisdeffre thought. His wits began to return to him in the moment of this great emergency. He counted the men who were present. There was one—the general officer—at the opposite end of the table to the president, as Crévy clearly was of that body. There were four men sitting on each side.

Boisdeffre knew that he was in the presence of the Ten.

"You can sit," said Crévy coldly. One of the attendants handed Boisdeffre a chair into which he sank readily enough. He was physically weary, and his legs were cramped from sitting in an uncomfortable position in the cab.

One of the windows at the back of the general officer was open, and the blind stirred by the wind, tap tapped in monotonous fashion. It was the only sound which broke the ominous silence until Crévy got up to speak.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are met here to-night as a judicial tribunal to try this man here, who is our joint prisoner. We were to have met at eleven o'clock in the Rue de Varennes, as you are aware. This man had sworn fealty to us, and to him was communicated our place of meeting. He broke his oath, and at once went to inform the police. Within an hour his act was betrayed to me by an accomplice."

Boisdeffre visibly shuddered. Although he knew the truth, it is terrible sometimes to have things put into words.

"I took steps to warn you all, although in any case we should not have been taken, and to change our place of meeting to this house. In the second place, I laid a gunpowder track to await the arrival of the police, and they are even now seeking for the bodies of the killed among the ruins." A murmur of approval and surprise ran through the assembled men. They had been too far away to hear the explosion, or to learn what had occurred. Crévy went on in the same even tone he had used through-

out. "I found this man at the scene of the act of which I have spoken, and have had him conveyed here for your decision. He has broken his oath, and betrayed us into the bargain. If you decide for his death, you are to put one of the black dice into the dish; if he is to be punished some other way, one of the yellow ones; if he is to be let go, one of the white ones." Boisdeffre now saw with a curious fascination that before each man were three dice—black, yellow, and white respectively.

An attendant came forward with a brass bowl in his hand of Eastern workmanship, and went round to all the Ten, coming to the president last. Crévy looked into the bowl.

"They are all black," he said briefly. Then he turned to the prisoner, fixing him with the cold glance of his keen eyes, as he had before in the Rue de Varennes.

"You are at liberty to speak, if you have anything to say. It is your last chance."

Boisdeffre did not speak. He was gathering together his scattered faculties. Great beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. His hands were moist and clammy.

Crévy took out his watch, and laid it on the table, noting the time. "I will give you five minutes. Time is precious, and we have other business to transact, of more importance."

The man could be sarcastic even to a condemned criminal, in the last moment of his earthly life.

Boisdeffre licked his dry lips with his tongue. Speech had become strangely difficult to him. When he managed to get the words out, it was not to say what Crévy and the rest expected.

"You . . . said . . . she . . . betrayed . . . me . . . told you . . . Stéph——" the rest of the word choked.

"Certainly. She was a woman."

"God! God! Have mercy on me!"

They were his last words. The attendants came, gagged, and bound him. He did not struggle or resist. Then they led him out in the opposite direction to the one by which he had entered. The hall lamp had sputtered itself out into absolute darkness, a type of an ebbing life.

The night air, cool even in August, played upon the temples of the doomed man. They walked about fifty yards, and came to one of the bridges of the Seine. It seemed as if no one was about. The desolation, which is sometimes in the environment even of a great city, was about Boisdeffre as the desolation of despair was about his heart.

Defly a rope was passed round his neck, and himself hung from one of the pinnacles

of the bridge, his feet just touching the lapping waters of the river. The Ten had not come to see their order carried out. They had passed on to the other and more important business of which Crévy had spoken.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DECISION OF THE PRÉSIDENT

MARCION DACRES threw himself with frantic energy into the work of rescue which was being carried on in the Rue de Varennes when he reached it. Moreau was helping too. They recognised each other by a silent gesture. Only when the worst was over were the question and answer exchanged, "No news?" "None."

Here and there were men groaning under a weight of *débris* which pinned down a broken arm or leg, or crushed thigh. These were brought out first, placed in an ambulance, and quickly carried off to a hospital. Then the dead were dug out. Once part of a wall fell owing to the completion of its disturbance by the blows of a pickaxe. No one was hurt by the fresh accident, but Marcion had a very narrow escape. By the time it was all over, he was a mass of dust and grime, and

was reeling with weariness ; but he had won the universal respect of all who had shared in the work of recovery.

Président Didot had been on the scene all the latter part of the time, and had asked specially several times the name of the indefatigable, but unknown, worker, obviously a gentleman and a man of fine physique. No one could answer the question, until it chanced to be put to Moreau.

"He is an Englishman, a Monsieur Dacres, and is staying at the hotel of Signor Servati," was the information given by the captain of the *Léopard*.

"He shall have some recognition—an order or a ribbon—for this night's work, this Monsieur Dacres," said the Président to the Chief of Police. He little knew how soon the obligation would be increased.

"It would be a difficult matter to find one who deserved it more. He has risked his life again and again, and done the work of half a dozen men," said the Chief. They saw Marcion reel and nearly fall.

"*Mon Dieu !* he will pay for it by an illness, if he does not take care," exclaimed Didot. The Chief went round to the Englishman with his flask. A pull at its contents revived him.

"I should like to shake hands with him, and

thank him," said the Président to Moreau. The latter went and fetched Dacres. He had learnt the social importance of the distinguished on-looker.

Marcion came forward and lifted his hat. "I am afraid I am not very presentable."

Didot shook him warmly by the hand. "Your appearance does you credit, sir, for it is the result of all you have done for these poor victims of some one's perfidy, and for us all."

"Thank you, sir," said Dacres. "I shall ever remember and value your kind words."

"You must come and see me at the Elysée," said the Président. "You will have a warm welcome."

The words, commonplace in themselves, although the compliment was genuine enough, were made remarkable by after events. Over Marcion there swept the thought of his double loss, especially the mystery which surrounded the fate of Dulcima, thoughts over which had been thrown the anodyne of his exertions until now.

"You are very kind, but I am in trouble—another time, perhaps." The Président did not press him. He saw that he was utterly weary. Neither was it a suitable time for explanations.

"I am very sorry," he said. "My carriage

is at the end of the street. The coachman will drive you to the Hôtel Servati. It can then return for me. I am in no hurry." Didot turned to the Chief. "Send one of your men with this gentleman. He will point out my carriage and instruct the coachman to drive to Servati's, and then return for me."

It was a kind thought, for the Président judged that Dacres was not in a condition to go alone. In which perhaps he was right. Moreau and the police officer walked with Marcion, and assisted him into the carriage. Mechanically he said good-night, and the carriage rolled rapidly away. Signor Servati met Dacres in the vestibule. He had been on the look-out for him.

"No, nothing has occurred since you left. We have no clue. Father Moerin called an hour ago, but was not able to hold out any hope of finding the young lady to-night."

It was, in fact, already a.m., although the dawn of another eventful day had not yet come.

Dacres went up by the lift to his room, and flinging himself on his bed, all dressed as he was, sank immediately into the sleep of utter weariness, never stirring until one o'clock had struck at midday. Physical fatigue had conquered mental unrest in the merciful provision

of the Creator of our dual complexity of mind and body.

Father Moerin called at ten o'clock. He was on his way to the Elysée. Finding that Dacres had not appeared or answered to the knock when his hot water was taken up, the priest and Servati went together to the Englishman's room. They entered it, and found Marcion lying on the bed wrapped in profound slumber.

"He did splendidly last night," remarked Father Moerin, looking down on the grimed, hardly recognisable face.

"In what way?"

"Oh, in the rescue of the wounded in the Rue de Varennes after the explosion. I hear from the Chief of Police that the Président, who was present, remarked on it specially, and asked that he should be introduced to himself."

"That accounts for his appearance," said Servati with a wave of his hand towards Marcion. "He looks as if he had been grubbing in an ashpit."

"Let him sleep. It is merciful. I fear he will never see his lost ward again. If the police and ourselves have failed, there is not much hope. She will probably be dragged out of the Seine to-day."

"At least she is not yet in the Morgue."

"No, she is not in the Morgue—yet."

Then the kind-hearted priest went away. He was going, as we have said, to the Elysée; and that on a definite errand. Over Paris that morning hung a veil of mystery and fear. The explosion of the night, and the strange rumours of coming trouble which disseminated themselves, no one knew how, through the city of fashion and pleasure, were weighting men's minds with dread. When and where would the next blow be struck? Already they were looking for the upheaval of the streets and sight of barricades; already they were listening for the sound of firing. Gradually it had come into the whispered talk of the cafés and boulevards that Président Didot would be the next object of attack. He was the people's idol, but that would not save him from the knife or revolver of the anarchist and assassin. When the blood-thirst is abroad, it can only be stayed and satisfied by blood. What more favourable opportunity than the occasion of this *fête* at Clichy? Didot was to go and return to the Elysée in state, the cynosure of a million eyes, the target possibly, nay, probably, of a felon hand. Already Madame Didot had implored her husband to abandon his intention of being present; to send an excuse to the

organisers of the affair. But the Président was obdurate.

Father Moerin had come on the same errand. He was shown into the library. Didot was sitting at his table looking over the papers Crévy had brought him the previous afternoon—the papers which had been stolen from the Moyle.

Two secretaries were sitting at a long cabinet under the central window. Father Moerin indicated them with a gesture.

"I should like to speak to you alone, Président."

Didot told the young men to go into another apartment. Father Moerin knew that one of them was in the pay and service of Crévy, and he saw this particular secretary shoot a glance at him as he went out. The glance said, 'I should like to know what it is you have come to talk about.' Moerin went himself to see that the library door was securely shut behind the retreating forms of the young men.

"I should promote to another sphere or pension off Monsieur Lansquinet, sir," said Father Moerin slowly, after he had returned and taken a chair opposite the Président.

"Why? He is a very good secretary."

"Because he is a spy."

"Do you usually promote or pension spies?"

asked Didot, with a smile. "I thought the rule was to shoot them out of hand."

"Yes, if you catch them at it red-handed. But Lansquinet comes of too good a school for that."

"What school does he come from? You deal in mysteries this morning, Father."

"From the school of Monsieur Crévy."

"Crévy recommended him to me—it is true. But one must get one's servants through some one's recommendation."

"*Suspice Danaos et dona ferentes*," quoted the priest.

"By the by, I have just been looking over these papers Crévy brought me yesterday—they are of extraordinary value. No such treasure-trove has come into the hands of another nation, certainly in our time."

"You know how they were obtained?" asked Father Moerin.

"Crévy asked leave to go and fetch some papers he had heard were of great value. The Government was to put a price on them. Yesterday he brought them. Whatever sum he asks I should say he would certainly get."

"They were stolen," said the priest; "stolen from the Englishman whose conduct you admired so much last night, and who happens to be an old friend of mine. He was knocked

down by a man named Boisdeffre with the butt end of a pistol. Crévy, in his turn, stole them from Boisdeffre; he is the abler scoundrel of the two."

"I do not like these methods," said the Président after a pause; "but the papers are of incalculable value to us for all that. It is not our business to inquire too closely how they have been obtained."

"I do not like to hear you say that, sir. No good can come of dishonourable means. Besides, these papers are only of value in a certain contingency."

"And that is?"

"In case of war with England, which, to France, would be suicide with or without these papers."

The Président shook his head, but the significance of the gesture was not quite apparent. He locked the papers into a drawer.

"Well, we will consider about that another time," he said.

Didot himself was looking tired, after being up the greater part of the night. Neither could he fail to participate in the unrest of the metropolis.

"It was on quite another subject that I came to speak to you, sir — the *fête* at Clichy."

The Président put up his hands in deprecation.

"I hope you have not come, Father, to urge me not to go."

"That is exactly the very purpose I have come for."

"It is useless. I have quite made up my mind. Madame Didot has been urging me this morning. If I am not moved by her eloquence, I am afraid even your arguments will not have the desired effect, Father Moerin."

The priest looked very grave.

"I am afraid you must listen to me for a minute or two, sir. Madame Didot's feeling is no doubt the natural apprehension of a wife after the event of last night, and considering the known feeling throughout the city. Mine is more definite. We have, as you are aware, Monsieur le Président, sources of information which are not open to others, not even to the police. The sources, and even the nature of that information, it is not in our power to disclose. It sometimes comes to us under a seal, which forbids our even acting upon it. That is not the case now. I am at liberty to warn you, sir, to plead with you, to alter your decision."

Didot looked at Father Moerin.

"You have been informed—you believe?"

"I know," said the priest quickly, and with emphasis, "that an attempt will be made to-day on the most valuable life in Paris, in France—your own. For the sake of this unhappy country, for the sake of peace"—Moerin laid stress on the word with reference to the first part of their conversation—"for the sake of order, I respectfully urge you to remain at the Elysée to-day. At present I have no certitude when or where the blow will be struck; but we are gathering up the threads of the conspiracy, and in a very short time, possibly even to-morrow, we may be able to materially assist the police, and to secure the apprehension and conviction of the men who are aiming this foul blow against you and the France that we love."

The priest spoke eloquently and with deep emotion. Didot was visibly moved. He took his chaplain's hand in his, and pressed it affectionately. The two men had drawn visibly nearer to one another of late.

"I can never forget your kind words; but even they cannot move me. I have pledged my word to go to this *fête*. If I do not go all Paris would know the reason. They would set it down to fear. My hold on the citizens, who at least do not love a coward, would be

gone. The purpose of the assassin would be gained almost as effectually as if he had buried a dagger in my side or fired a bullet into my heart. Forgive me for seeming obstinate, Father ; for what you ask is impossible. When I took the headship of the State at the mandate of the people, I took it with all its risks."

Some men are raised, some men are deteriorated by sudden elevation to a great position. Didot was one of the former. From a demagogue he had become a statesman ; from a self-seeker he had developed into a patriot. The responsibility of power was the crucible in which the pure gold of his nature was being separated from the dross which had coated it in the past. Moerin saw the change, the development, as he had not seen it before, and was glad. He recognised the truth of the Président's words and the immutability of his decision—and was sorry. Only now was Didot's worth becoming apparent when Didot must die. It is so easy to kill when you have a mind that way.

"At least you will take a sufficient escort, sir?"

"Oh, yes, that is provided for. In fact, I hear it coming up now."

Outside the Elysée there was the dull tread of horses' feet and the gay clink of the harness.

Then the champing of bits. The time had almost come for the Président to start for the *fête*. The route of his advance and return was already gay with bunting. The hot August sun shone on the wide boulevards of the city.

"I have to ask one favour, sir," said Father Moerin.

"You generally have only to ask to have," replied the Président with a laugh. He was not going to let gloomy forebodings cloud his spirit or his face that day. "What is it?"

"That I may go with you."

"And if need be, die in my stead?"

"I shall be there to take what care I can of you, and to keep an eye, which is not yet dim, on both sides."

"And, if need be, die in my stead?" repeated the Président.

"A priest has not much to lose," said Moerin. "His life is like a solitary islet in the sea."

"I shall be glad to have you with me," said Didot, "and to witness yourself the disproof of your own prophecy."

The Président went to get ready for his drive. Father Moerin stood at the window looking down at the State carriage, and the brilliant uniforms of the escort, which was to accompany it on either side. He was not

thinking of the pomp and circumstance of State which he saw before him, but of the man who had just left his side. The revelation had come to the priest, not merely that Didot was necessary to France at that juncture, the only one who could steer it through its present troubled waters, but that, in addition, he was a greater and a better man than any one had ever suspected.

"God preserve him this day to France," said the priest reverently. Then he heard his name called, and he followed the Président down the wide steps, and across the impromptu carpet to the open barouche which was to take him through the crowded streets, to whatever destiny was marked out for him.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DISCOVERY OF DULCIMA

DULCIMA was suffocated into insensibility, and then drugged. She lay where she was placed the previous afternoon until about two o'clock the next day. To tell the truth, the men who had handled her inanimate body did not greatly concern themselves whether she lived or died. All they cared about was that, if she had overheard the directions given in the next room to hers, she should not be in time to betray them. Fortunately they were clumsy and inexperienced in administering the narcotic, and Dulcima was a good deal stronger than a cursory glance led them to think her, or the priest's prognostications with regard to the Morgue would have been fulfilled. In any case, she would have slept away the most important hours of her whole life. About two o'clock in the afternoon of the day of the great *fête* at Clichy, Dulcima

stretched herself, yawned, felt terribly sick, faint, and ill. She was lying on her back. Where was she? What had happened to her? Paris had not been exactly a kindly, a hospitable hostess to her. She had been twice drugged into unconsciousness, she had had practically no food. "The minister of her interior" was proclaiming aloud that he had been badly treated. His department had been terribly starved. Overhead were some wooden rafters with the lower sides of slates between, covered with cobwebs. Dulcima turned over on one side, not without some difficulty, for to move in the slightest degree hurt her. Opposite to her eyes was a wooden partition. At the bottom of it was a hole. Through the hole she saw the large beady eyes of a brown rat gazing at her. He had been alarmed by her moving—as she had lain still so long—and had retreated behind his screen. Dulcima was no less afraid of the rat. She uttered a little cry, and sat up. She was in a stall of a disused stable. How had she come there? How long had she lain where she was? Doubtless the man who had seized her, when she emerged from her bedroom, had flung her down on the straw, on which she had been lying. He had done it roughly enough, for she could feel her bruises. Probably the man was too much

taken up with his own plans to pay sufficient attention to discover her sex, or he might have handled her more delicately.

Dulcima, with some difficulty, managed to get upon her feet. For a minute or two she was too giddy and sick to stand by herself, and had to lean against the boarding of the stall for support. She was beginning to think more connectedly. Hitherto it had seemed as if a cobweb were stretched over her brain. What day was it? The same in which she had lain down in her room, or another? Dulcima could not tell, for the light, except that she was in a stable, instead of a bedroom, was very much as it had been when she first lost her senses. Yet it seemed to her in a vague way that a considerable space of time separated then from now. If she had been gone a long time, what would Dacres think? He must have been in a terrible way. Nay, he must be frantically searching for her now. She liked to think he cared, although she hated to think he should be in trouble. These composite feelings nerved her to make a fresh effort to get out, to communicate with her guardian.

Dulcima supported herself along the boards to the end of the stall. Then a difficulty occurred. For the end of the stall was about a yard away from the outside door. She was

afraid to trust herself in the middle space without a support. The attempt must be made, however. She exerted her determination and flung herself forward. She gripped the latch of the door just in time to save herself from falling. When Dulcima tried to lift the latch and pass out, she discovered that it was fastened. She could have cried with disappointment in her weakness. But her nerves were strong, and her will power considerable. She summoned both to her aid, and beating on the door with her disengaged hand, shouted as loudly as she could. For a minute or two all the noise was in vain. Then she heard a shout in tones which made her heart beat. Yet no one came. Then there were steps of some one coming. "Are you there, Dulcie? It is I, Dacres." She tried to call out, but only gasped. Her legs gave way under her, and she sat down on the floor. But Marcion, standing in his room in the hotel, had heard the knocking and cries. He had just returned from a second visit to that terrible Morgue since he had roused himself at midday. To think that Dulcima had lain all those hours within fifty yards of the hotel, and no one had ever thought of searching the stables which formed, as has been said, a component part of the narrow alley at the back of Servati's!

He ran to the door, and with all his force flung himself against it. The latch was fastened with a small padlock, but the staple could not withstand the shock, and gave way at once. Dacres flung the door open, and entered. Dulcima was sitting on the stone floor where there was no straw, looking up at him piteously in a half faint.

Marcion went down on his knees beside her, and covered her face and her hands with kisses out of sheer joy at the recovery.

"My poor darling! what have you gone through? Have you been here all the time?"

"I like that," she said—she meant his kissing her. Before she had kissed him. There is a subtle distinction between the two.

He went on doing it for a little while. There was probably no part of her face and neck and ears he did not kiss. It seemed the only way of expressing his feelings, or recording his relief after the awful tension of the last few hours. Dulcima approved of the way in which Marcion expressed his relief, &c., only she was too done and weak to return it. She just accepted it, put it out as a deposit account to interest in her bank so to speak. They were interrupted by hearing steps. Servati and two of the servants had heard Dacres' shout, and his steps running downstairs and out at the back.

Hearing them coming, Marcion stood up and assisted Dulcima to rise. Seeing that she was too weak to walk, he just gathered her up in his strong arms, and carried her, she nothing loth. He passed out with his burden.

"I have found her," he said to Servati ; "but not yet heard her story. She must have been drugged, I think, or she never could have lain there all this time."

The whole affair was, of course, a mystery to him ; but he could wait for its solution now that he had got Dulcima back again comparatively safe and sound. Signor Servati showed his practical sense by fetching the girl himself a glass of wine, and some light biscuits to soak in it. Dacres would never have remembered that she was practically starving. He laid her down, reluctantly relinquishing her light little body from his clasp, on a sofa in their sitting-room. Servati retired. No one could see Dacres without appreciating how the land lay ; then Marcion fed her with the wine and soaked biscuits until she felt much better, and lay back with a sense of joy and rest, such as she had never experienced before.

Still Marcion wondered how she had got into the plight in which he found her. At last he asked her.

"I cannot understand it at all—your being

lost and my finding you where I did. It seems inexplicable."

"I do not understand it myself, and I do not want to understand it," and she curled herself round towards him. But a curious man is no more to be put off than a woman in similar predicament. The matter might be too important to be put on one side.

"Tell me about it," he urged; "I want to know."

Then she told him how she had gone to lie down, of what she had heard, of the noise she had made in kicking her shoes off the bed, and of her being seized and carried off. It was all there was to tell. She told it disconnectedly, hardly appreciating the sequence of it all. But Dacres did. He leaped to his feet, looked at his watch. It was a quarter to three. He could piece it together perfectly. Some one was to be shot from an upper room in an empty house in the Rue de Ville on his way back from the *fête*. Dulcima had been put out of the way because it was suspected that she had heard too much—put out of the way until it would be too late. But the strength of the drug had been miscalculated. Father Moerin had told him that the Président was going to the *fête*, and that he should try and dissuade him from going because there was mischief stirring.

Nevertheless Marcion knew he had gone, for when he first went out after rousing himself that morning he had seen the last part of the presidential equipage and the attendant cavalry.

"My darling, I must leave you at once. You have found out a great secret. The life of the *Président* is in danger, but I may yet be in time to save him." He stooped and kissed her, and ran out of the room. In the hall he called for Servati.

"Quick! quick! I want you!" The landlord was speedily on the spot. "My ward was carried off because she had overheard the details of a plot against the life of the *Président*."

Servati put up his hands. "God forbid it!—yet the city has been full of rumours."

"There may yet be time. How long will it take me to get to the *Rue de Ville* on the way to *Clichy*?"

"The best part of an hour with a quick horse. *Monsieur* would ride?"

"Yes, certainly. Can you have one saddled?"

"I can borrow one immediately." So saying, Servati hurried off.

Dacres snatched up a telegraph form and wrote on it:—

His own vigilance, less obvious, was probably even more reliable. He almost wished that he had made a compact with Madame Didot that each should have an eye to one side of the route; but there are some things which cannot well be put into words. Behind the Président's carriage were others. In the first the Chief of Police sat with two of the aides-de-camp and a secretary—not Lansquinet, who had been left at the Elysée. The Chief was full of thought with regard to the explosion of the previous night in the Rue de Varennes. His interest was doubly stirred, for his reputation was at stake in the discovery of the culprit or culprits, and his own men had been the sufferers. As yet he had got no clue. He saw clearly that they had been made the victims of false intelligence. But Boisdeffre, who had been his clandestine informant, and who alone might be expected to throw some light on the affair, had mysteriously disappeared. If he had purposely laid a snare for the police, no doubt he had absconded with the proceeds of his treachery; if, on the contrary, he had himself been deceived, the man or men who had been daring and wicked enough to plan the explosion would not hesitate to do away with Boisdeffre, for they had clearly been forewarned of the treachery. There was one

other whose testimony would have been of even greater value than that of Boisdeffre—the Princess Dolgorouki. She, however, had paid the penalty of her curiosity. In death she was as beautiful as she had been in life. Her last scheme was woven. She had died in the plenitude of her powers. Two matters the Chief had seen to long ere this. One was to telegraph a description of Felix Boisdeffre to every station and seaport of France; the other to have a thorough search made in the ruins of the empty house of the Rue de Varennes for a secret entrance. The Chief was convinced that the gunpowder had been fired within a very short time of the explosion, yet he knew that no one could have gone in or passed out by either of the two ostensible entrances and exits. He was not successful in tracing Boisdeffre, but he had solved the other matter. The secret way had been laid bare by the picks of the police. That Crévy was implicated there was no moral doubt, but he could not be arrested on mere suspicion; and of his complicity, there was not a tittle of evidence. A week ago Crévy would have been an indispensable part of the procession. That to-day he was left out was sufficient evidence that he had fallen from his position of chief adviser to the Président. Father Moerin, riding there, had

won all along the line. Crévy was defeated, and in defeat, as in everything else, he was eminently dangerous. No one knew this better than the priest himself. He did not fear for his own life, for the simple reason that he did not regard it. A brave man without ties of any kind sups with death unconcernedly. Moerin feared for Didot and for France. They were passing Crévy's house at the slow pace which was observed throughout. Crévy was standing at the window, cold, impassive, unmoved, wearing his impenetrable mask. No one would have guessed that he was fighting against tremendous odds for a great stake, and that this hot August day was the day of final decision. He bowed respectfully to the Président, courteously to the priest. Both returned it. Moerin knew, perhaps Didot too, that it was the courtesy exchanged between duellists in a fight in which no quarter is to be given on either side, which is to be waged *à outrance*.

"Crévy would have made a fine actor," said Moerin.

"There is no line of life in which he would not have shone if he had chosen," replied the Président, who perhaps missed some of the point of the priest's remark.

There was silence for some minutes in the carriage, the Président bowing automatically

to the lifted hats and cheers of the populace. At the same time he was following a train of thought which the sight of Crévy had suggested.

"I intend to see that Englishman again to-morrow," Didot said at length, bending forward towards the priest. He added, looking into the eyes of his *vis-à-vis* with a quiet smile, "I have decided to restore him those papers. He seems to me to be too good a man to be the victim of treachery."

Moerin smiled his thanks.

"The decision is worthy of you, sir," he said. Moerin was delighted in every way, for it meant the last stage in the downfall of Crévy, and the abandonment of the dangerous *rôle* of agitator against peace with Great Britain, which Didot had clung to somewhat pertinaciously—partly because it was popular, partly because distrust of England was his real opinion.

"How about Crévy? As he handed them to you, he will want to have a word in the final settlement."

"He will be compensated, amply compensated," said the Président with acid emphasis. It was clear that the topic was displeasing to him. In diplomacy and politics there are devious paths, and honourable men have to

wink at their existence. They swallow them if needs be, but like a pill, with a wry face and rebellious stomach.

The route to Clichy was accomplished satisfactorily. No incident of moment to arouse suspicion occurred, not a jarring or hostile note was heard in the unanimity of reception accorded by the people to the Président. Madame Didot, who had been silent throughout the journey, began to breathe more freely, and to talk volubly to her husband after the official presentations had been made of the organisers and committee. Moerin was near them always, but not obtrusively. He was too tactful for that.

Luncheon was served in a big marquee, and pavilions, over which the arms of France floated, had been prepared for the Président and Madame Didot. The return journey was timed to commence at a quarter past three.

At three o'clock the Chief of the Police was called on one side by an officer of the force.

"You are wanted, sir. Will you please to step this way?"

The Chief followed without asking any questions; he was a man who never wasted words. Under the shadow of some trees, in a secluded part of the grounds, a man was standing, who evidently shunned general observation.

The Chief recognised him at once, and walked up to him with eager step. His fortune was greater than he expected. His professional reputation might be regained after all, for the clue to much mystery—how much he did not even guess—was before him.

The man was Felix Boisdeffre.

"I have been searching for you everywhere, and have telegraphed your description throughout France," began the Chief without further preliminary.

"Did you look in the Morgue?" asked Boisdeffre with caustic emphasis.

"Yes, of course," replied the Chief, taking the question literally. "But you were not there. It is reserved for the dead, and you happen to be alive." This seemed like trifling.

"Yes, I happen to be alive. That is just it. But the shave was perhaps the nearest man ever had—to tell the tale afterwards. Neither is my life now worth very much, if it is known that I escaped."

"I will see to that," said the Chief curtly. "Tell me your story as briefly as possible, as time is pressing."

"It was known to the Council of the Terrible Ten that I had betrayed their meeting-place."

"How was it known?" inquired the Chief.

"Never mind. It was known," replied Felix. He could not bear to frame Stéphanie's name. For he loved her still, in spite of all. For over love reason has no power.

"A woman," the Chief commented to himself. Aloud he said, "Never mind. Go on."

"I was seized and driven through Paris brought before the Ten, condemned to be hanged, and hanged."

The Chief gazed at him. He had begun to doubt this man's sanity.

"Who seized you?" he asked.

"Crévy."

"Who condemned you?"

"Crévy and the rest of the Ten."

"Who hanged you?"

"Crévy's servants." Boisdeffre went on to describe the place of meeting in relation to the bridge over the Seine, where what seemed the final tragedy had taken place.

"Should you know any of the others?"

Boisdeffre named the men he had recognised.

"They shall be arrested at once," said the Chief. "But first I must tell the Président. I will bring him here."

Then it occurred to him that he had not asked by what miracle Boisdeffre had escaped. The latter satisfied his curiosity in a few words. The noise of some one coming had caused his

executioners to hurriedly depart, he supposed. At any rate, they had not waited to see that their errand was accomplished. His neck had not been broken—being pretty tough, and probably the water, which his feet just touched, had buoyed him up a little. He had, however, been suffocated into insensibility, and when he roused himself he was in a corn barge, floating down the Seine. The bargee had cut him down just in the nick of time. Boisdeffre had brought him back as evidence of the truth of his story.

The Chief found the Président in his pavilion getting ready to leave the *fête*. The carriages had already come up. He took Didot on one side.

"I think, sir, I have unravelled the threads of a great conspiracy. I should like to have your sanction in arresting Monsieur Crévy and three others."

He mentioned the names of those of the Ten whom Boisdeffre had recognised at the long table, when he himself had been condemned.

"The evidence ought to be conclusive," said Didot gravely.

"I think it is sufficient, sir," replied the Chief. "Will you please to step this way, and hear it for yourself?"

The Président agreed, and thereby his departure from the *fête* was delayed; and the delay in his return was of more importance than it appeared at the time.

The interview with Boisdeffre satisfied Didot.

"You may telegraph, ordering the arrest," he said to the Chief. Then lowering his voice, "See that this man is well taken care of, for his own sake as well as ours."

"You may trust me for that, sir."

The Chief was radiant. It was the greatest *coup* of his life. He gave orders about Boisdeffre to his subordinate officer, and then hurried off himself to the telegraph office, which had been erected on the grounds, despatching an instruction in cipher to the headquarters in the City.

The return procession did not start until half-past three, on the Chief's return from the telegraph office.

As the Président got into the carriage, he whispered to Father Moerin—

"I am afraid Monsieur Crévy will not get his compensation."

Moerin looked a query. He had seen Didot's conference with the Chief of Police, and guessed there was something in the wind.

"I have just ordered his arrest for treason against the State—and murder."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE ATTEMPT ON THE PRÉSIDENT'S LIFE

DACRES was delighted to have the exhilarating sense of motion on horseback after the strain and tension of the last few days. He wanted to shake off the horrible reminiscence of those periodical visits he had paid to the Morgue and the haunting dread of those hours of loss. Dulcima was restored to him again, and he could not doubt that she had learnt to care for him just as her absence had shown him that he loved her. He galloped along the shady and well-watered streets like a man who has just released himself from a heavy burden too onerous to bear, which has been bowing his shoulders. Yet if he had only known it, he was going to great danger, to an encounter with a desperate man, Crévy's agent and emissary with much of his employer's spirit in him, and going unarmed. For he had laid his pistol the previous night

on one side, and had omitted to put it in his pocket in the exhilaration of his feeling at the recovery of Dulcima, when he started so hurriedly. He only had his riding switch.

The captain of the *Léopard* saw Dacres going off at a gallop, and of course thought he had had news of his ward.

As soon as Marcion reached the more crowded thoroughfares, through which the Président was to pass on his way back from the *fête*, he had to go more slowly, and at last was reduced to a walk. He chafed at the delay, but it was inevitable. Again and again he pulled out his watch. It was exactly four o'clock when he reached the end of the Rue de Ville. Dacres knew this was the time the procession was timed to reach the street. It had not come; but the people were on the tiptoe of expectation. A new difficulty faced him. No one was allowed in the middle of the road. The crowds were in serried masses on the pavement in front of the houses. Samson would have had to exert all his strength to get through them to any of the houses, and it would have taken even him some time. Time was exactly what Dacres could not afford to lose. Already in the distance he could catch the faint sounds of cheering; the Président was evidently approaching, his pro-

gress was punctuated by the multitude. A man who looked like a small shopkeeper was standing on the kerb where the Rue Dervais passed the Rue de Ville at right angles. Marcion made his way to him by a little dexterous horsemanship.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur," he said; "but do you happen to know if there is an empty house in the Rue de Ville?"

"Yes, I know it well, for all sorts of efforts have been made and prices offered to get it for to-day, but without effect. I suspect the owner is an old *grognon* (curmudgeon) who likes not to be obliging. You can see it from here." He pointed to a house a little taller than those near it. "It has ivy over it, the only one that has."

"Does the ivy grow both sides?"

"Yes, it's rampant—a deal too rampant for my fancy—shuts out——"

But Marcion had gone off with a hasty "Thank you." He could find the house easily at the back where it looked out on a narrow street, not much used as a thoroughfare, being parallel to the broad Rue de Ville.

Already the shouts of welcome were taken up by those at the end of the Rue de Ville. Evidently Didot had reached it. Marcion rode up to the back, threw the bridle of his

horse over the railing, and went up to the door, which was at the top of a flight of steps. It was locked against him. Marcion had anticipated this, and was already on the look-out for another mode of entrance. It fired his ardour to realise, as he did there on the spot, that the would-be murderer in cold blood was in that house. He had hoped earlier that he might have been in time to have ridden round and stopped the Président before he entered the Rue de Ville; but the delays *en route* had thrown him back on the alternative plan of preventing the shot being fired in the house itself.

There was a window on each side of the door at a distance of a yard or so. Beneath the windows was a steepish drop, as there was a basement to the house. It was easy for a sailor like Dacres to climb up to one of those windows. He took his riding switch in his mouth—it was better than nothing in a tussle, as it had a hard silver knob—and having selected the window on the left-hand side, was very quickly able to lay his hand on it. Marcion blessed the ivy, which his shopkeeper informant had anathematised. It all depends on the point of view. The window was insecurely fastened with an ordinary catch. Dacres drew himself up to the requisite height,

broke a pane of glass with the riding-whip, turned the catch, after putting the switch back between his teeth, threw open the sash and jumped into the room. Any one passing the street would undoubtedly have taken him for a burglar: but Marcion was in too great a hurry to consider these things. Already he could hear the roar of the crowd close to, and he knew that even seconds were golden. Besides there was no one in the street. The inhabitants had all gone to see the procession.

Dacres passed across the room and hall and ran up the stairs as lightly as possible. Before him were two doors, both shut, and the position of them indicated that the rooms with which they communicated, looked out on the Rue de Ville. Which should he choose? There was nothing to indicate which was right, or to direct his selection. It occurred to him that probably the room on the left-hand side would be chosen, because it was the one nearer to the way the Président was approaching. He would risk it anyway. It was so close a thing that had he been wrong, in all probability Dacres would not have been in time.

On the landing he had kicked off his shoes. He now as swiftly, and yet quietly as possible, turned the handle, and entered the room he

had selected. Under a curtain by the window a man was crouching, gazing out into the road, just showing his eyes and the top part of his head over the sill. The man's attention was so concentrated on what he was about to do, and the noise of the cheers was so great, that he had not heard a sound, and was quite unconscious of the fact that any one had entered the house he imagined was empty of every one except himself.

Just as Dacres stood in the room, the man raised his pistol and took careful aim, covering the spot where the carriage of the *Président* was coming up. Madame Didot at this moment caught the gleam of the barrel. Before she had time to move or cry, Dacres had bounded across the room, and struck the pistol upwards with all his force at the very moment the miscreant who held it pulled the trigger. It went off, but the bullet only struck the roof of a house opposite. The pistol itself just missed the curtain and was hurled out into the road, falling close to one of the horses of the cavalry escort, causing it to kick and plunge violently, thus adding to the confusion.

The man balked of his prey, when it seemed ready to his grasp, robbed of the fruits of his long waiting, sprang in a fury upon Marcion, before the latter could defend himself, and



"There was at once a dangerous stampede."

struck him a violent blow on the left temple, which sent him reeling back against the mantelpiece, with which his head came in contact.

As Marcion fell to the ground, stunned, the man rushed to the door, and fled, galloping off on the horse Dacres had left and escaping in the confusion.

The people, frightened by the sudden crack of the pistol, and the plunging of the horses, for one or two others had quickly followed the example of the first, gave vent to loud cries, and there was at once a dangerous stampede; but Président Didot and Father Moerin—who had seen the danger first in Madame Didot's eyes, his back being towards the assassin—sprang out of the carriage, and by their voices and efforts, quelled the alarms of the crowd; then a greater cheer than ever, deafening in its unanimity, when it was understood that an attempt had been made on the life of the Président, and that he had escaped unhurt, went up.

A couple of police had elbowed their way through the people, and rushed into the house with a view to capturing the man, who had fired the shot. But he had ample time to get clear away, before a lane could be made to permit their passing through. Instead, they

found Marcion lying stunned on the floor. He had already proved, however, that his head was sufficiently hard; and in a few minutes, after some water had been thrown over him and a little brandy forced between his teeth, he recovered himself and sat up.

"Has he gone? Was I in time? Was the Président killed?" The questions came out in quick succession.

"I am afraid he's escaped, sir; but the Président is all right."

With a little help, Marcion stood up, and between them, the two officers supported him down to the main entrance; there they were met by Didot and the priest.

"Why, it is my friend, the Englishman again!" exclaimed the Président. He came forward and took Marcion's hand.

"You saved my life. Under God, you have been my providence."

"And that of France," put in Moerin, pressing his friend's other hand.

"This is not the time to thank you," said Didot, "neither are any thanks adequate to the great service you have rendered me. Father Moerin and I will help you to the carriage. I am deeply grieved that you should have been so hurt in my service."

The police surrendered Dacres to the Pré-

sident, and he was speedily brought to the carriage. Madame Didot could not speak, but she bent down impulsively, and kissed the hand which had knocked the pistol up.

From being very white, Marcion turned crimson, the blood surging through his veins.

"Please do not do that, madame—it is not worthy of it."

Madame Didot put up her face, and kissed her husband before all that multitude, for the news spreading had thronged the street so that nothing could be seen but a sea of heads. Then the crowd cheered itself frantic once more, and taking the horses out of the carriage, dragged it in relays all the way back to the Elysée.

Dacres was not a little dazed from the blows he had received. The refrain was fitting itself to a tune in his head, "in time, just in time," all the way to the Elysée.

CHAPTER XXXII

FRAGMENTS AND FINISHINGS "

DULCIMA was staying at the Elysée. Mrs. Grundy, whose nationality is cosmopolitan, and Madame Didot had agreed that thus it should be. For she was to marry Dacres, and his relationship to her of guardian to ward was about to be merged in a closer tie. Dulcima was not at all the conventional young lady, it is hardly necessary to say to readers of this chronicle; and the culminating scene of their remarkably short courtship had not been quite *en règle*. If Dulcie had been educated in France, she had certainly by no means imbibed the French views of matrimonial preliminaries. There were no formalities. He did not go on his knees. She made no pretence of considering the matter. Dulcie did not even hide her (more or less) diminished head on his shoulder, and look up after a long

time with a tear-stained face, as they do in all good books.

It is sad to relate the absence of all these things, but *magna est veritas et prevalebit*.

This is a veracious chronicle—or nothing.

“I love you, sweet, more than all the world,” Dacres had said. “I want you to marry me.”

She kissed him on the lips. Dulcima had never had any hesitation about kissing him. It was such an easy stage from guardian to lover.

“There is nothing I should like half so well,” she said, and she kissed him again.

This went on for some time. But Madame Didot insisted that the Elysée was the proper haven at this intermediate stage of their relationship. So Dulcima went and took both the Président and his wife by storm.

Before she went, she turned certain discarded garments of a masculine appearance on to the sitting-room table in a bundle.

“I hate them,” she said. “They must go at the back of the fire.”

“The ‘back of the fire’ is, of course, a metaphor at this time of year,” put in Dacres mildly. “For my part, I am very particularly partial to them.”

“For goodness’ sake, why?”

"Because they are associated with you—when I fell in love with you, or at any rate when I first knew I was in love with you."

Dulcie put her head on one side and eyed them.

"There is something in that," she assented. Then she put one finger under his chin, and lifted his head to a level with her eyes, she bending down, for he was sitting.

"You dear old thing, you've got a good deal to learn."

Dulcima declined to explain this cryptic sentence either then or afterwards—when perhaps she might have been more explicit.

Then she went off to the Elysée to win more hearts.

On the day of the *fête* at Clichy, the Président handed a bundle of papers to Dacres. Very little had been said of what the latter had done. There are some occasions on which language is inadequate. Feelings, too deep for words, have a way of expressing themselves otherwise. The Président and Marcion understood one another. That was sufficient.

"I should have given you these back again anyway," said Didot, as he handed over the documents.

"Thank you, sir, I know it." Moerin had

told him. Perhaps he would have guessed it anyway—when he came to know the President.

“You have had a great deal of trouble ; but on the whole I think it has done good. For nations are composed of individuals ; and that we are friends and understand one another may be for the general as well as the individual good.”

Didot spoke with a certain dignity. The events of yesterday, with the newspaper comments of that morning, had made him feel more than ever before that France was at the back of him. In addition, the fact that an Englishman had saved his life, the life that they valued most just then, had not been without its effect upon the French newspapers, and on the feeling of Paris ; for gratitude and generosity are French virtues, and they are rarely based on strict logic.

The papers, which had been the cause of all these difficulties, were sent off by a special courier to the British Admiralty. Their return added another feather to Dacres' cap at home, as well as the fame of what he had done in Paris.

When they were safe in London, Marcion was able to give an undivided attention to the other matter which claimed his thoughts.

Dulcima demanded no less; and what she demanded she generally got.

Crévy was condemned, and even a French jury in this case failed to find extenuating circumstances. The murder of those unfortunate policemen in the Rue de Varennes, and the instructions which were traced to Crévy with reference to the assassination of the Président, were a little too strong and recent. So the "quality of mercy" was not in this case "strained" to bursting point.

One of the deputies turned State evidence; so that the rest of the Ten were brought to justice and condemned to varying terms of imprisonment.

Felix Boisdeffre was pardoned and pensioned. Moreau received a large sum from the Admiralty at home through the intervention of Dacres, "for the assistance he had rendered in recovering certain papers of very great value," although his connection with the restoration was not perhaps quite obvious.

On an August morning, just before that month yielded its place to September, Marcion Dacres and Dulcima Mordaunt were married by Father Moerin, the two contracting parties being of his faith. The British Ambassador was present. The Président of the Republic gave the bride away.

"I told you I should be a help to you," she said, "if I came with you. Now confess! Wasn't I right?"

Dacres did confess. Dulcima was quite right. It was a way she had in the eyes of her husband.

THE END.

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